

152ND BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF ABANINDRANATH TAGORE

“The Ever-Falling Darkness of History”

Abanindranath became the center of the renaissance in Indian art from about the turn of the twentieth century. He set the agenda in several ways: thematically, because of the kinds of subjects that he chose to paint; stylistically, because of the techniques that he both used himself and taught to his students; institutionally, because of the schools and salons of art that he either headed or founded.

ANANYA VAJPEYI

In the opening years of the twentieth century, Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951), Rabindranath's nephew and a prominent artist living at the Tagore palazzo in Calcutta, Jorasanko, made a trio of paintings depicting the Emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628–58) at different stages of his life, together with his great monument to love, the Taj Mahal. Abanindranath painted Shah Jahan thinking about the Taj, then supervising its building, and finally, on his deathbed, gazing at it from a distance. The paintings were shown at the Durbar in Delhi in 1903, and one of them, *The Passing of Shah Jahan*, won the silver medal in a contest there.

The Durbar itself was a Mughal institution—it meant, literally, “holding court” — eagerly inherited by the British crown that controlled most of India. The British defeated Bahadur Shah Zafar in 1857–58 and symbolically took over the court of the Mughals. The Delhi Durbar of 1903 marked the coronation of Edward VII as emperor of India.

Abanindranath's works, displayed on this occasion, should have read like an ironic commentary on the evanescence of power and on the pathos of mortality that afflicts all human endeavour, even the greatest architectural project of one of the most powerful monarchs ever to rule India. In giving Abanindranath the prize, however, the British authorities evidently missed the irony altogether.

In his essay on Rabindranath's relationship to Orientalism and the Orient, Amit Chaudhuri describes Abanindranath's paintings as “faux Mughal,” with “their life—blood partly in the kitschy, the popular. He claims that this is a historically accurate description, rather than a value judgment, but it's difficult not to sense Chaudhuri's disapproval of what he sees as the unreconstructed Orientalism of Abanindranath's art — even if he grudgingly admits that the artist is considered to be “the father of modern Indian painting.”

Several major art historians writing about Abanindranath and the Bengal School of painting associated with him and his students have examined in detail how he was trained and promoted by his teacher, E. B. Havell (1861–1934), and appropriated by Sister Nivedita (1867–1911). He thus became drawn, willy-nilly, into both Orientalist and nationalist projects that were unfolding in tandem in colonial Calcutta between roughly 1895 and 1915. Even Chaudhuri's incisive reading of the complex lifeworld of the Tagores and of their prodigious creative output as a family, which leads him to identify Rabindranath's Orientalism as “revisionist,” does not give Abanindranath his due.

The consensus in the art historical scholarship is that Abanindranath was a preeminent figure in his cultural context, but that he cannot be counted as a truly gifted painter. Too much about his art reflects the influence of those with whom he was in conversation—from the first systematic historian of Indian art, the Englishman Havell, to Indian intellectuals involved in Swadeshi politics like his uncle Rabindranath Tagore, to the Japanese painter Kakuzo Okakura who was trying to theorize an ‘Asian’ art, to his colleagues and acolytes at the Calcutta Art School, at the Bichitra Club in Jorasanko, and at Kala Bhavan, the art department at Visva Bharati University, many of whom became increasingly enamoured of the traditional arts of Bengal.

That such a diverse range of understandings about the importance of pictorial and sculptural arts for Indian nationalism could all converge at the Jorasanko house and in Santiniketan, is a testament to Abanindranath's role as a magnet for vanguard thinking about art in his time. Alas, it is also the reason why most critics regard his work as a clear glass through which to see the ideas of others, rather than admiring it for the images that reflect a genius all his own.

The existing scholarship in English



The Passing of Shah Jahan. Painting by Abanindranath Tagore. 1902

takes Abanindranath seriously as an art theorist, an institution builder, a nationalist, and a hub for Bengali, Indian, Asian, and European art practice as well as for the exchange of ideas across significant cultures of modern art throughout the pre-Independence period. But his critics are concerned about the numerous influences upon Abanindranath, and the ripple effects of his being serially taken up with different kinds of art (Western, Japanese, Chinese, Persian, Buddhist, Rajput, Mughal, or tribal Bengali) upon his disciples and peers.

He learned so much from so many sources, evolved so continuously as an artist and thinker, and painted in such a bewildering array of styles over the course of five decades, that it might seem patently impossible to discover in his oeuvre a single answer to his search for an Indic “self.”

Abanindranath became the center of the renaissance in Indian art from about the turn of the twentieth century. He set the agenda in several ways: thematically, because of the kinds of subjects that he chose to paint; stylistically, because of the techniques that he both used himself and taught to his students; institutionally, because of the schools and salons of art that he either headed or founded; theoretically, because of his writings and publicly expressed views on art; and finally, ideologically, because of his dealings with all of the major practitioners, historians, ideologues, and institution builders of the times who had anything whatsoever to do with Indian art.

In addition to his prominent, indeed towering presence in the world of art and aesthetics, he was also directly involved in nationalist political activity, especially during the Swadeshi movement (c. 1900–1910). From about 1900 to 1925, Abanindranath and his mentors and disciples dominated the world of Indian art from Calcutta.

Abanindranath's Shah Jahan triad is supposed to convey *samvega*, the aesthetic shock that the painter experienced in his encounter with Indian history, particularly the history of Indian art, as expressed through both the Mughal miniature form and the sublime architectural form of the Taj Mahal. Abanindranath went on to paint a number of works depicting the Mughals, specifically the great emperors Jahangir (r. 1605–1627) and Aurangzeb “Alamgir” (r. 1658–1707).

He also painted the tragic figures of Dara Shikoh (1615–1659) (Aurangzeb's older brother and heir apparent, whom he had assassinated) and Bahadur Shah Zafar (1775–1862), the last Mughal, who was defeated and imprisoned by the British in 1857, and made to endure the execution of his sons in Delhi, eventually dying in captivity in a jail in Burma five miserable years later.

Far from being an expression

of kitsch, an Orientalist reflex, a programmatic appropriation of an especially high moment in precolonial Indian art, or an ideologically driven revivalism of the Mughal miniature form, Abanindranath's engagement with Shah Jahan and other protagonists of the Mughal dynasty is at the very heart of his reaction to the history of India and its traditions of representational painting.

Shah Jahan Dreaming of the Taj Mahal, *The Building of the Taj Mahal*, and *The Passing of Shah Jahan* all show us, not the Taj Mahal directly or in detail, nor Shah Jahan alone, but the emperor in the act of looking at the Taj — “looking,” that is to say, with his imagination, with his memory, as well as with his physical eyes, at a structure that stands for a number of things at once.

These are: his undying love for his dead queen, Mumtaz Mahal; his own erstwhile prowess as a monarch, once able to commission and supervise the building of so magnificent a monument; the fleeting nature of human life contrasted with the abiding



Rabindranath Tagore singing to the accompaniment of esraj played by Abanindranath Tagore, c. 1888, Jorasanko.

nature of beauty itself; the political power and aesthetic refinement of the Mughals, rulers of Hindustan such as were never seen before or since; and last but not least, the facticity, the eternity, the intransigence, of Death.

Mention is made of the death of Abanindranath's young daughter in the Calcutta plague of 1902, an incident that by the painter's own admission had left him depressed and filled with thoughts of mortality as he worked on *The Passing of Shah Jahan*, showing the emperor's daughter Jahanara sitting at the foot of his deathbed.

A 1915 issue of a Calcutta journal, *The Modern Review*, carries a small piece by the historian Jadunath Sarkar, titled “The Passing of Shah Jahan.” Painted thirteen years earlier,



Night at the Shalimar - The Emperor Shah Jahan. Painting by Abanindranath Tagore

Abanindranath's work by the same title is the frontispiece of this issue of the magazine. Sarkar's account reconstructs the last seven years of Shah Jahan's life, from 1658 to 1666. In this period, Shah Jahan was imprisoned in Agra Fort by his son Aurangzeb, subjected to neglect as well as mental and physical abuse, divested of his considerable property, continuously spied upon, repeatedly insulted to his face and in writing, and forced to stand by helplessly as Aurangzeb had two of his brothers, including the crown prince and Shah Jahan's favourite son, Dara Shikoh, eliminated.

He became very pious during his final years in captivity and was cared for by his daughter, Jahanara Begum (the female figure in Abanindranath's painting). When he passed away after a brief illness in 1666, his body was denied a grand funeral and instead buried very quietly and simply in the Taj Mahal, in a grave alongside his dead wife, Mumtaz Mahal. Not only did Aurangzeb not come to the burial; he did not even come to pay his respects to the grieving Jahanara until a month later.

In 1916, as part of the collection titled *Balaka*, Rabindranath published a poem titled “Shah Jahan.” This poem was probably written in 1914, soon after Rabindranath won his Nobel Prize for literature. Abanindranath's painting, Sarkar's history, and Rabindranath's poem all return to the same subject: the passing of Shah Jahan. Each one of these is a work beautiful in its own medium and in its own way.

There can be no doubt that both Sarkar's historical account and Rabindranath's poem are in dialogue with Abanindranath's painting, so closely do the three works resemble one another, and such is the unity of mood between them. Rabindranath's “Shah Jahan” is addressed directly to the emperor and chides him for seeking “To conquer time's heart / Through beauty” (ll. 43–44). The Taj Mahal, radiant, pearlescent, is “one solitary tear” that the grief-stricken Shah Jahan hopes will “hang on the cheek of time” (ll. 15–16).

How wonderful the deathless clothing
With which you invested
Formless death . . . ! (ll. 45–47)
Poet-Emperor,
This is your heart's picture,
Your new Meghaduta . . . (ll. 59–61)

But Shah Jahan cannot change the logic of human history, human love, or human memory, all of which follow the arrow of time. Abanindranath, Sarkar, and Rabindranath all seem to be spiralling in ever-widening loops away from any kind of straightforward allegory about the mortality of the flesh, the immortality of a thing of beauty, the capacities and incapacities of power, and the persistence or the frailty of love. They seem also to

be distancing themselves from an obvious commentary about the nature of the Mughal Empire or by analogy, the British Empire — although such a commentary could indeed be read into these three meditations on the passing of Shah Jahan.

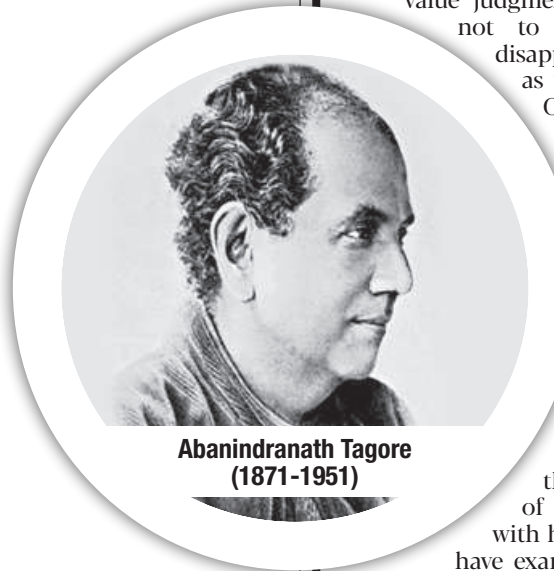
In this search for an Indic tradition and an Indic idiom, Abanindranath inevitably turned to some of the best-known stories and characters that could be found in Indian literature, mythology, religion, and history, and set about illustrating familiar textual narrations with novel pictorial depictions. He also simultaneously relied upon his contemporary art historian friends and colleagues, who were during the same years writing the first accounts of Indian art through the ages, to supply a chronology as well as geography of styles and themes.

His milieu in colonial Bengal was predominantly Orientalist, and Abanindranath, though brilliant in his own way, did not have his uncle Rabindranath's unique ability to withstand the force of Orientalism and to develop a highly individual, fiercely non-conformist approach to the Indic past. Many, if not most, Indian Indologist scholars, artists, and intellectuals in places like Calcutta and Poona in the early twentieth century were Orientalists to some degree or other: this does not mean we dismiss their historicism, their philology, or their politics as being in bad faith. Colonized nationalists are often Orientalists: this ought to be taken as a sort of sutra of colonial history.

I began with a comment on the irony of the British administration giving Abanindranath an award for painting an aged emperor looking at his prize possession—the Taj Mahal, India's contribution to the seven wonders of the world—even at the very moment when it slipped out of the view of his dying eyes, about to close forever. As the Mughals disappeared into the ever-falling darkness of history, so would the British, if they but knew it.

Perhaps the first step toward regaining India's lost sovereignty was the intuition of the finitude of sovereignty; the knowledge that the self transcends even the most awesome capacities of sovereign power, remains beyond the reach of all historically known or as-yet-unimagined forms of power, articulates itself in its quest for a limitless freedom. The certainty that power ends is only a reminder that the self does not. The Tagores sought more than India's liberation from British rule. They sought self-knowledge.

Ananya Vajpeyi is a fellow at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi. She works at the intersection of intellectual history, political theory and critical philology.



Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951)

Abanindranath's Shah Jahan triad is supposed to convey *samvega*, the aesthetic shock that the painter experienced in his encounter with Indian history, particularly the history of Indian art, as expressed through both the Mughal miniature form and the sublime architectural form of the Taj Mahal.