

# The 'Contextual Modernism' in the Silk Paintings of Maniklal Banerjee

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## Abstract

The paper tries to analyze the silk paintings of Maniklal Banerjee (1917-2002) who was greatly influenced by the artists of the so-called Bengal school of art. The school started by Abanindranath Tagore did not remain confined to its own time and space, but grew into dynamic new modernisms over a span of nearly a century. Art historian Sivakumar invoked a number of artists of Santiniketan and called it a "contextual modernism". The paper tries to re-read the spirit of Santiniketan artists on the more recent and un-researched art of Maniklal Banerjee- who contextualized in his own way the Bengal 'school' that had by now turned into a 'movement'. The spirit of freedom runs at the core of this movement and finds a new language in the late twentieth century artist's renderings of daily life and Puranic narrations.

**Keywords:** Bengal School, Maniklal Banerjee, Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Indian art, Puranic art, aesthetics

## Introduction: Maniklal Banerjee (1917-2002)

Barely remembered beyond textbooks of art schools, Maniklal Banerjee was one of the first innovators of the technique of using water-color on silk in India. In order to engage in any critical discussion on his works, it is ironical that this painter- a recipient of the prestigious Abanindra Puraskar in 1999- needs an introduction (Plate 1 and 2). Exclusion of an artist, of course, is nothing singular in the way canons are created in the humanities, but it is necessary to analyze varied artforms, especially if they serve as dialogues that chart and map the emergence of particular versions of modernisms.

Born in a small village called Sonaranga, presently located in Bangladesh, Maniklal Banerjee's life involved a lot of movement- between homes, places, political situations, aesthetic ideals and ideologies. A short booklet on the artist by Pradipkumar Sengupta, *Maniklal Bandyopadhyay: Sātwik Chitrakalār Dhyane (Maniklal Banerjee: In Search of the Truth in Art)* introduces him rather abruptly in the blurb as an artist who did not want to be modern, even though he himself adds later that his artwork consciously integrated the traditional and the contemporary. However, he rejected the system of categorizing Indian art based on occidental standards of modernity. A mere cursory glance at his works on silk may tend to stereotype him as a rural landscape painter. His subjects were largely reminiscences of his childhood experience of Sonaranga- women and children in their daily chores, local folk culture, animals, birds, boats on brimming water bodies, fairs and festivities- all immersed in a misty, dream-like palette that he enhanced by what was called the 'cold water wash-off' technique. But on a little careful engagement with his works, the immense influence of the Bengal School of art, led by

Abanindranath Tagore- the sacred icon of many a young artist of his time- becomes evident. He reveres the tradition of the Santiniketan artists, not only in his themes and style of painting, but also in his own essays on art. These essays are collected in a small volume called *Ākār, Nirākār, Bikār (The Form, the Formlessness and the Transformation)* published in 1989.

Maniklal Banerjee was least of all interested in copying landscapes mechanically, for he had clear notions about the distinctions of art and craft. Even in the earliest of his works, his most realistic phase, he avoided the Eurocentric aesthetic ideal of realism that coveted the intricate third dimension so faithfully in oil. The artist chose instead, to prioritize *rasa*. He quotes Vatsyayana to declare his aesthetic aspiration in explicitly traditional terms:

“*Roopabhedah pramānani bhāva-lāvanya-yojanam |  
Sadrishyam varnakabhangam iti chitram shadakam ||*”

(Formal differentiation, well measured accuracy, depth of feeling, grace, combination, Resemblance to the object, technique- together form the six essentials of art.) (1989, p. 40, own translation)

His later works are distinctly more experimental, although still defiantly rejecting many of the rules taught at art-schools and seeking inspiration in indigenous philosophy. Even though he was well aware of the most recent developments in ‘modern’ art in Europe, he had a keen understanding of the fact that in the context of the newly prospering departments of Fine-Arts in the art schools in India, there were huge gaps difficult to bridge. He expresses his disapproval of having separate departments for Indian and European styles of painting, and the reluctance in admitting modern Indian art as fine-art even after years of intercontinental aesthetic exchange. Experimentation need not necessarily be contrary to Indian aesthetics, he felt. His interest in Japanese and Medieval Indian art did not keep him away from the spirit of his own time. The painter’s awareness of contemporaneity is evident in his innumerable sketches of urban working women, which are drawn with remarkable strength of expression, while refusing to eliminate their bodily perfection by breaking of form. Maniklal never accepted abstraction fully, as breaking divine form was sacrilege in a sense. In his essays, many of which are personal musings on ‘modern’ times, Maniklal uses a gentle tone of child-like amazement. He calls the spurt of abstraction a change of season, as he fails to determine with certainty the best and the worst of the sudden increase in influx of western ideas. In places, he almost seems embittered by the rupture of form that is being lauded so much by young artists. In India, artists had always used symbols to define beauty. Art had not necessarily been realistic, yet it did not require to engage in distortion. A complete abandon of rules is anarchical, writes Maniklal, which had never been the case in any artform at any place on earth. Such an abandon would make art frivolous and it would not be of any purpose to mankind. Two elements determine the art of any place in any period: *leela* (play) and *nitya* (the eternal), the first being the spirit of the age and the second being a set of rules that provide the necessary structure to any medium. This second type- the innate grammar of art is that which makes art a language. (Bandyopadhyay, 1989, pp. 40-41) In this respect of treating painting as a linguistic tool, Maniklal’s ideas converge with those of Nandalal Bose, about which I shall elaborate in another section.

## **Maniklal’s Context**

It is too obvious to remark that all modernities are contextual, some more than others. Abanindranath’s subjects may have been historicist but his purpose was nationalistic in a broad sense, and that makes it contextual. Nationalism was the context. The deity remained a mythical

icon of a glorious past, but she existed to serve a modern need. The next generation of Santiniketan artists were stylistically and thematically contextual, having had a greater exposure to techniques across borders and continents, and also for being influenced by diverse aesthetic philosophies. This does not mean they did not use classical motifs, of course, but they were more conscious of making them relevant to contemporaneity. In other words, the art was closer to the lived everyday in spite of being profound in terms of the ideal or the pure form. By the time Maniklal painted, India was a nation, freedom was hers, Abanindranath's deity had already had a revered name. But the people were far from free. In a sense, all these painters were contextualizing modernisms in their own way, but this does not make them any less original because their contexts were naturally very different. In fact, it is not the aim of my paper to differentiate their contextualities, but to point out that in being contextual they were individualizing modernisms.

Maniklal was most admired for his Puranic paintings- a theme debatably historicist. Yet the depiction of the same was extremely local. He not only chose working class men and women as his models, he even styled his gods and goddesses as folk deities. Such a dualism is a common tendency not only in modern painting but also in literature and other art forms, where myth reworks itself in two ways- one being the textual and historical form of the enlightened, and the other being the localized and practiced form of the common man. Maniklal's art employs simultaneity to perfection. Dark shades and forceful lines convey poignantly the ineffectual angst of the post-Independence poor, yet they develop beyond their temporality and become the eternally yearning soul. (Plate 3 and 4) Maniklal's lifelong search was to be the search for the greatest possible extent of aesthetic liberty. The superficial conservatism breaks apart as he seeks to negotiate contextuality into an aesthetic 'everything-ness'. The highest art was that which could speak multiple languages at once, not limiting itself to any one strain. Clearly, Maniklal's contextuality is more complex than it appears.

### **The Santiniketan Ideal**

The paintings completed by him between 1980-2000 bear impressions of his newly found sanctuary in Tantra, after he had travelled widely with his ascetic friends and read deeply the volumes of Swami Abhedananda, and Promodkumar Chattopadhyay's *Tantrabhilasir Sadhusanga* (1941). One of his favorite scenes for painting was that of the ascetic who had newly discovered a liberated soul, his expression of the soul-bird flying off, freed from the cage of bodily existence. In numerous renditions on silk of the theme of correlating the soul and the bird, he breaks existing rules of realistic morphology and exercises mastery over the pure spirit of the ascetic, an ideal beyond the confines of age or location. However, the artist's ascetic ideal is not only the celibate wanderer in robes. A number of analogies in his own accounts and impressions present myriad images of the free spirit- the aged and uncannily accurate fortune teller, the madman loitering on urban streets, the scholarly and remarkably wise schoolmaster, and the like. Maniklal Banerjee sought his inspiration in the mysticism inherently present in his surroundings, the local that overcame location and became the Santiniketan artist's ideal- "the golden peacock, the golden deer" (1989, p. 12, own translation), the unlocalised and eternal beauty envisaged by Abanindranath Tagore.

It is hardly surprising that the impact of his dear 'Aban Thakur' refused to die out even after nearly fifty years since the master passed away, as more and more students of art aligned themselves to what, after half a century, did not remain a 'school' of art anymore, but turned into

a great movement. A similar argument has been put forth by an exhibition curated by R. Sivakumar at the National Gallery of Modern Art in 1997, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India's Independence, by citing nearly a hundred works each of four artists: Nandalal Bose, Ram Kinker Baij, Rabindranath Tagore and Benode Behari Mukherjee, the four brightest disciples of a professedly revivalist artform begun by this same great master, Aban-Thakur, who had inaugurated the loose artists' group called the Indian Society of Oriental Art. In an interview in two parts entitled "All the Shared experiences of the Lived World", Sivakumar discusses his ideas on curation in the exhibition "Santiniketan: Making of a Contextual Modernism". He tries to illustrate why the so-called Bengal School was not ideally a school at all. Members of the group had also agreed among themselves that the umbrella term disregarded their contextuality, mentions Sivakumar, while adding that he only emphasizes the same awareness of disjunction between the 'school' and the 'movement' more clearly:

"Their art practices were interrelated but did not stylistically converge. They were linked more by concerns and as participants in a discourse to which each contributed in a different manner. They themselves saw this very clearly but many who wrote about them did not." (Sivakumar, 2013)

He elaborates the idea with the example of the much misrepresented Nandalal Bose, who is either read as a nationalist and traditionalist, or as one who tried to integrate too many modes of artistic language in a small frame. I must enter into a discussion of Nandalal Bose's approach to the new artform that the Santiniketan artists sought to develop, before I move on to discuss his immense influence on a far younger and grappling Maniklal Banerjee in his art-school days. Sivakumar argues that by not seeing Nandalal Bose in the context of the scenario of Indian art in his own time, one may only fail to realize the contextuality of his modernism. Nandalal Bose sought to integrate varied languages in his art so that they may converge into a unique rationale of individual perspective:

"All great traditions, Nandalal realised, was nurtured by a broad spectrum of language and not by a lean style, and that for a real cultural resurgence we needed an art scene with a large spectrum of language and function. He set himself to build this as an artist and teacher. Not only working at multiple levels and with varied conventions but also analysing their linguistic rationale for the benefit of his students. In this, he was not different from Paul Klee for instance; only their contexts were different." (Sivakumar)

Sivakumar interprets Nandalal's rather controversial versatility a result of his own choice to place the communicational language of art over the artist's own self-expression. Modernity was not a personal endeavor for the Santiniketan artists to begin with. It came as a necessity to readdress post-Ravi Verma art to be more inclusive about the type of realism Indian art was supposed to embody. Therefore, Nandalal Bose's integration of forms was not so much artistic expressionism as much as a conscious approach taken for Indian aesthetics to grow into, and for new Indian artists to imitate and adopt. Nandalal Bose was a teacher and passionately so, because of which he considered it a duty to make his own art an example rather than a personal exhibition.

A school of art turns into a movement when it transcends its own contextualities as expressed by its members, and becomes more inclusive by including more contextualities that revolve around a similar but dynamic ideal. This is what happened with the Bengal School which began with the far more trans-national approach of Abanindranath, who sought to procure, analyze and recreate lost oriental forms; through his students such as Nandalal Bose who freely integrated contemporary aesthetic languages into the new mould; and finally into young artists

like Maniklal who tried to diversify Indian modernism with increasing exposure to Western abstraction and formal experimentation, without losing the trans-local Santiniketan ideal. I would discuss more about Maniklal's own interaction with Nandalal Bose, but before that I must attempt to explore the version of modernism that the Santiniketan artists' works sought to develop.

### **Contextuality and Indian-ness**

Sivakumar explains that like all modernisms, the modernism was contextual in the sense that they are a product of their time and place, no modernism is ahistorical. But the Santiniketan artists were keen on creating a new Indian art with its immanent contextuality of both technique as well as theme. Their art was integrated diverse local scenes, but they did not find historicism to be essential to make art Indian. Their adherence to indigenous identity was closer to day-to-day life of the common people and far more immediately contextual even though the forms that influenced them were mostly classical oriental. In a reflective essay entitled "Smritichāran" (In Memoriam), Maniklal Banerjee writes of his experiences as an art-school student. This essay is part of a collection which bears testimony to the huge impact that the so-called Bengal school had on himself and his peers. He writes of a particular event in which Abanindranath Tagore came to visit a yearly exhibition that was routinely being held and was remarkably pleased by the painting by a young teacher of Indian art who excelled in the miniature style. The subject of the painting was the decorating of a traditional bride. Another of the same artist's painting was that of Emperor Jehangir on a hunt. (Bandyopadhyay, 1989, p. 72)

Unfortunately, these paintings are quite lost and this young teacher passed away soon after, far before his time. This brief reminiscence by his student, Maniklal, however, served to determine what was appreciated as a good piece of art by Abanindranath Tagore. Clearly, it was not mere theme or style but a spirit of reflective individualism. The oft-repeated motifs of the bride, the hunter-emperor or the ascetic- all of them epitomize the search for inspiration and hope. They also imbibe a deep-seated confidence in the manifestations of one's identity. The bride has her youth to her advantage, the hunter-emperor has his strength, the ascetic has his vision. Very evidently, the source of inspiration could be contextual with every passing generation of artists, but the conscious thirst for modernity anchored them firmly to the movement that Santiniketan was becoming over a span a century. Did Maniklal Banerjee drink from the same well of inspiration that his masters drank from? We may not be so sure, for after all, his age harbored an entirely new national identity complete with its political sanction. But was this Indian-ness really a new Indian-ness? While the form and dimensions alter considerably, the spirit remains that of yearning for liberation.

In one of Maniklal's best works, painted in 1992, an ascetic and his wife sing and dance together with arms upraised, a tiny hand declares at the edge of the painting- the search of the restless soul for freedom. (Plate 5) In another, a sage hurries off on a bullock, his face and body drunk in love for the beloved. (Plate 6) In Maniklal's paintings, rural children dangle unhindered from tall tropical trees beside full rivers, the youthful women seem to have far more questions to ask than they can afford to pay for, the saints and ascetics that populate the most number of his paintings epitomize the desire for transcendence. (Plate 7 and 8)

The artist also avidly drew landscapes, flora and fauna and a huge array of birds. He drew at least fifty sketches of birds, of which quite a few were painted on silk later. Sparrows, kingfishers, budgerigars and local birds filled his pages when he visited his eldest son's place

where there were plenty to choose from. Some of these were accompanied by little verses scribbled with a brush- short and simple, lilting verses that captured the spirit these birds embodied- child-like and free. (Plate 9) Maniklal Banerjee's preoccupation with local folklore is evident in one of his short verses on a tiny spring-time bird commonly found in Bengal, called the 'basanta-bouri'. (Bandyopadhyay, 2002, p. 4) He describes the sound made by the little bird as that of brass-vessels. He proceeds thereafter to conjure the image of the 'kalankini' or the degraded woman who must commit suicide by jumping into a well with a brass vessel tied to the neck, as a logical result of her crime of adultery. He goes on to compare his own attachment to the bird's music to the kalankini's attachment to the noose with the brass around her neck. The brass is at once the outcome of her pride and her shame, much as her lover was to her. The object of art crystallizes and outlives the moment of its making as well as the maker. It is not certain if the painter intended to capture this moving verse on silk, but it does provide a glimpse of the immense emotive diversity he sought to express through common scenes of his locality. Context and contemporaneity could never be isolated from historicity and myth.

### **The Search for Freedom**

Varied metaphors of freedom emerge again and again to re-define his "mon-pakhi" or soul-bird and its quest to escape the cage. In fact, the wandering soul was the vessel of mysticism, in Maniklal Banerjee's world. In a little anecdote about a wanderer who lived close to his home at Sonaranga, he describes how the madman shouted out gibberish into the air "Tunkali-lo-tunkali", what do you show with your finger?" Nobody could ever make out what he pointed at or whom he spoke to, but the young artist liked to believe that he, through some divine sense of instinct, knew this mystic truth:

Today I do feel from time to time, as if from the great Unseen (Adrisya) varied subjects are pointed at and shown with a finger. Is He the same- Kashibabu's Tunkali? Who knows? (1989, p. 5, own translation)

Early in his life, the artist himself had a taste of a vagabondish life, albeit for situations altogether different. Maniklal Banerjee's father, Jitendranath Bandyopadhyay, a liberal and practical minded Brahmin who believed in social service and liberty, decided to allow his son to travel, to learn art and try to make a living of his own in Kolkata. Already married by this time, the artist had to work hard and tediously before he received a diploma and then became a teacher of Indian art at the Govt. College of Art in 1939. As soon as he received the whiff of the Partition in the air, he knew that everything back at his beloved Sonaranga would be left only in his paintings. Selling or giving away almost all his possessions, he saved whatever he made out of his ongoing illustrations and kept his rather large family surviving, not lavishly, but with dignity. He rose to some degree of fame when he started receiving scholarships from the government to complete specific projects, few of the very first of the kind. In 1982, his works were exhibited in the Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai, and in 1983 at New Delhi's Triveni Kalasangam and met much acclaim. His new method of painting was very different from the usual styles of applying paint on silk such as sponging or dabbing, and due to this, the wash technique received the common name of the 'Maniklal technique' by word of the mouth. It still required a very high degree of expertise to control the water and not many artists could adopt it. Sengupta's booklet enlists more than fifty articles in journals, newspapers, art-catalogues and critical forums discussing the artist's works, along with an enumeration of his own contributions to exhibitions and galleries, and printed publications on issues relevant to his day. In his speech at the Eighteenth Annual Exhibition at

the Academy of Fine-Arts, published in *The Modern Review* in March 1954 explicates his views on modernity in art: "Art, of necessity, cannot and would not stand still. Close grip of the Culture and traditions of a particular place or age is a sure obstacle to the progress of art." But he does not espouse blind imitation either, whether of the oriental traditional artforms or of the Western masters. His work showed a great range of learning about the overseas techniques, as well as a hint of amusement with respect to modern and newly emerging stylistic trends such as abstraction. Mere imitation was craft, and that was not acceptable. Maniklal devoted his life to be united with the visible, natural Indian-ness around him. (Sengupta, 1995, p. 4)

### **Influence of Nandalal Bose**

Maniklal Banerjee's pursuit of perfection in aesthetic language had brought, while a student of art, into a close conversation with Nandalal Bose himself. In those days, the master was teaching at Santiniketan and was called "Acharya Nandalal" out of love and honour. He usually stayed at Santiniketan in a home overlooking the extensive landscape still quite unaltered by human intrusion. This was his place of repose as well as his place of practicing art. Maniklal Banerjee remembers having sat in the balcony of this particular home and of having asked innocent questions to the teacher. A short essay entitled "Shilpapasange Acharya Nandalal" (Acharya Nandalal- On Art) describes his affections for the great artist. On showing his own paintings to the master, the master had suggested he make corrections to his sense of composition. "Just as there is a rhythm and pattern in music, so too there is in a painting," (Bandyopadhyay, 1989, p. 30, own translation) Nandalal Bose had remarked. He had proceeded to explain that no element in a composition must appear as a still and out-of-place photograph of the object of study. Realism did not mean photography: "Photograph is the imprint of the outside, a painting is the imprint of the inside." (p. 30) It was Nandalal Bose who pointed out that Maniklal must devote himself, at least for a while, to the study of Puranic subjects. European genre painting had developed his perspective in a certain way- commonly the style in which art schools instructed their students- but in order to enhance his skills, he must also have search the alternatives that art could modernize into. Nandalal believed in allowing the soul to do the painting. The sketch of an external object could only assist the skill of the artist and do nothing more.

Following the master's advice, Maniklal went on to work elaborately on Puranic subjects. Some of the most appreciated are the scenes of the marriage of Siva and the dance of Siva. Siva and Parvati figure extensively in his work, as do shlokas and chantings in the name of Vishnu. These paintings are very different from his landscapes and do not make any pretensions to remain true to any of the grammatical postulates of realism. They are Indian to the very core, demanding reverence and faith from the viewer who must necessarily suspend disbelief. The gods and goddesses of the paintings appear remarkably familiar, however, which is very much in keeping with the natural tendency of Hinduism. The deities are mothers with children on their lap, but at the same time they transcend their ordinariness and become brilliant presences. Nandalal Bose had emphasized the need for a single object to govern and dominate a composition- an idea which obviously affected Maniklal's paintings in a big way. A single figure or two capture the viewer's attention while the other objects in the background appear blanketed in mist. The style is typical to water-colorists of today, but in case of Maniklal, they add an unearthliness to the most mundane of objects. In other words, he turns immediate context into permanence through his art.

Maniklal continued painting in this style very late into his career. As he struggled most of his life with economic disadvantages, most of his paintings had to be sold off without proper documentation, at nominal prices, to unaccounted buyers. Nor did he have the scope to rise very high in the hall of fame, being too busy devising ways to feed a large family. Yet he remains important in a long lineage of modern Indian painters influenced by the masters of the Bengal school. The name “Bengal School” itself becomes problematic when it morphs and modifies itself over the span of a century and continues bearing an impact on artists of the day. More precise would be to realize that Abanindranath’s aesthetic ideals initiated a movement of modernism in Indian art, which artists of every generation could contextualize. Maniklal Banerjee was one of the many late 20<sup>th</sup> century artists who recognized the seed and spirit of Santiniketan’s modernism and found it relevant.

### List of Plates

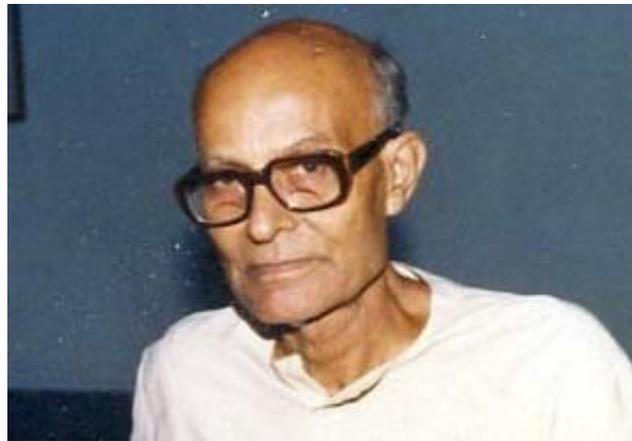


Plate 1: Maniklal Banerjee as photographed by a family member



Plate 2: Maniklal Banerjee Receiving the Abanindra Puraskar in 1999



Lotus  
SRI MANIKLAL BANDOPADHYAY

Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5: Maniklal, 1992. The verse reads, “Where can I find the beloved of my soul?”



Plate 6

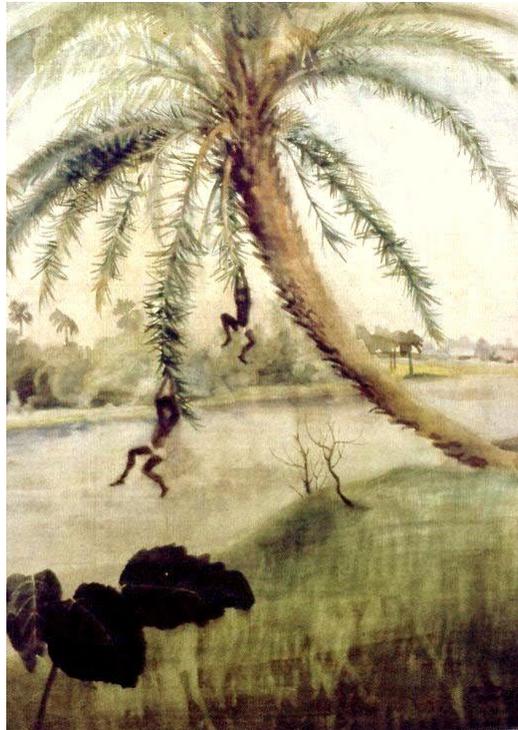


Figure 7



Figure 8



Plate 9: An example of the innumerable paintings of birds he drew

## Acknowledgements

The digital images of the paintings have been cited with the permission of Dipak Banerjee, son of the painter Maniklal Banerjee. I acknowledge his help and contribution and thank him for the same.

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