

From *Inner Eye* to *After Sight*: Benode Behari Mukherjee in London

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Abstract

Tracing the journey of artistic engagements with the Indian Modernist artist Benode Behari Mukherjee's works, starting from Satyajit Ray's 1982 documentary 'Inner Eye' to a 2020 exhibition 'After Sight' in London, this article reassesses scholarly and artistic encounters with Benode Behari's artistic consciousness in the light of international Modernist art movements and the artist's lifelong search for an ideal form. The role of nature in the development of his artistic uniqueness and ingenuity is discussed; as Benode Behari has often been erroneously imagined as a metropolis-centric Modernist artist, thereby also bringing to focus the broad subject of the significance of nature and the pastoral idyll in the development of Bengali Modernism and modern South Asian artistic consciousness. In this piece, a trajectory of the reception of his works is also drawn.

Keywords

Benode Behari Mukherjee, Satyajit Ray, South Asian Modernism, nature, form, *sadrśya*, similitude

In 1972, the Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray released, two years after the artist's death, the fourth of the series of completed documentaries¹ now attributed to the director, titled *Inner Eye* on the life, art and artistic vision of the late maestro Benode Behari Mukherjee. When Ray's film was made, the artist, today a familiar name in the history of modern art in Bengal and South Asia, had already lost his vision completely. The total loss of sight at the peak of the visual artist's career and his pursuit of art as a personal experience which remained unhindered by such physical limitations: allowing him to realise artistic production, artistic sensorium and the urge to conceive 'form' as rooted in the fundamental qualities of the human being, has been an intriguing subject in the Bengali and Indian artistic and intellectual sphere. Around this time, Benode Behari was a professor of art history at Kala Bhavana of the Visva Bharati University in Shantiniketan and was working actively post his blindness in a variety of media

¹ This along with *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961), *Two* (1964), *Sikkim* (1971) and *Sukumar Ray* (1987) are the only documentaries in Ray's corpus of films, though he had envisioned to make multiple documentaries which remained unrealised.



starting from collages, line drawings in ink to clay sculptures - exploring more enthusiastically than ever, the possibilities of the experience of a new *being* that the loss of visual stimulus can

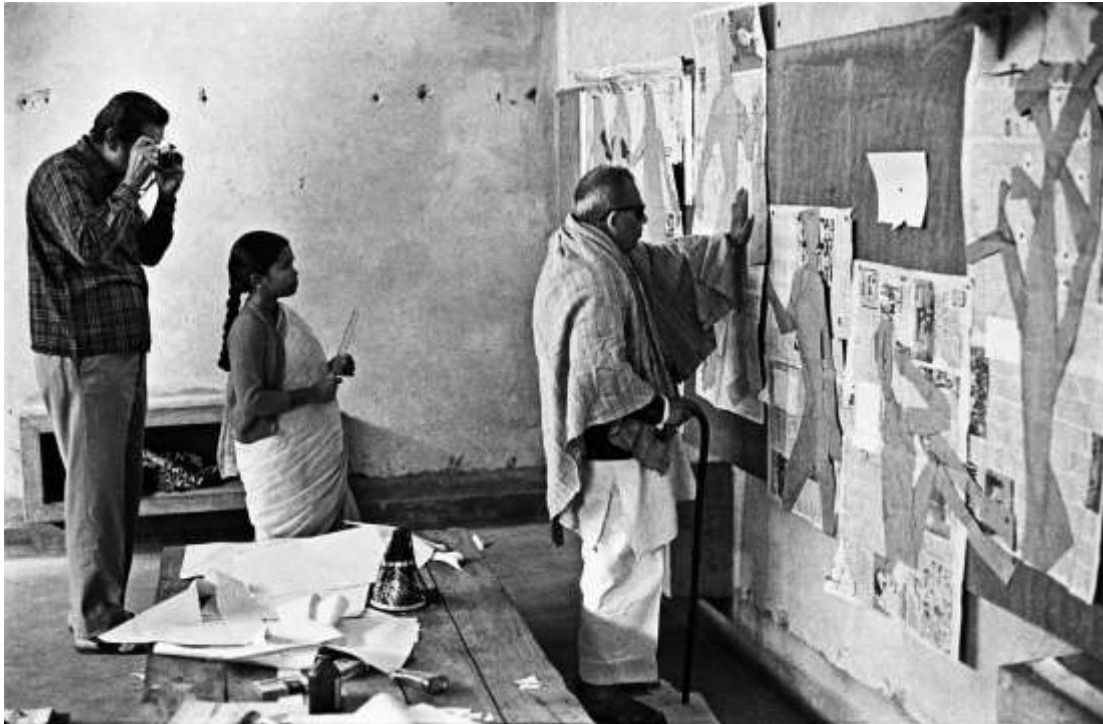


Fig. 1. Satyajit Ray photographing Benode Behari Mukherjee at work on his mural *Figures in various postures*. 1972. Paper cuttings were later transferred on to ceramic tiles. Photo by Nemai Ghosh. Image courtesy: Mrinalini Mukherjee and David Zwirner Gallery.

offer. It was this highly creative and transformative period of the artist's life that was captured in Ray film. Benode Behari passed away in 1980 after a long career of engagement with art and its history, beginning with joining the teaching faculty at Kala Bhavana, followed by a short tryst in Nepal as the curator of the Government Museum in Kathmandu (a period in which the artist was heavily influenced by Nepalese art and architecture, local life and pristine natural beauty- about which he painted profusely; and which were aptly conveyed through full cinematic force in Ray's montaging of continuous shots and closeups in his film), a teaching post at the Banasthali Vidyapith in Tonk, Rajasthan, establishing an art school of his own at Mussoorie, Uttarakhand, and being appointed educational advisor at the Art School of Patna, Bihar in 1954, before losing his sight completely in 1957 and returning to Shantiniketan and becoming a principal at the Kala Bhavana. As Ray's narration painted through words the sight of Benode Behari hunched and engrossed in his work, which was a common view in Shantiniketan². With original music scores composed by Ray himself and narrated in his own

² This sight of Benode Behari's absorption in work inspired many young artists and visitors at Shantiniketan: examples of art works depicting Benode Behari in such a posture can be found (Fig. 2), prominent among which is an artwork by Hungarian artist Elizabeth Brunner (1910-2001) in an Impressionist style, who visited Shantiniketan along with her mother Elizabeth Sass Brunner (1889-1950) led by a quest for Eastern mysticism. It was exhibited recently along with other photographs and paintings at the exhibition *Celebrated Painters & Photographers of Bengal and Santiniketan* held at the restored Belvedere House in Calcutta between 11 January to 12 February 2020.



Fig. 2. An artwork by Elizabeth Brunner (oil on canvas, 1930) depicting Benode Behari Mukherjee at work in Shantiniketan, from the exhibition *Celebrated Painters & Photographers of Bengal and Santiniketan*, Belvedere House, Calcutta. Image courtesy: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts.

narratorial voice, this film is today a classic and one of the finest examples of filmic engagement with the visual arts in the history of Indian 'new wave cinema' as well as in Modernist art practices.

The exhibition *Benode Behari Mukherjee: After Sight* opened in Grafton Street, London at the David Zwirner Gallery, a collaboration between the David Zwirner Gallery London and the Vadhehra Art Gallery New Delhi (who represents the late artist's estate), along with another parallel show of the works of the Japanese-American sculptor Ruth Asawa, on 10 January 2020 and continued till 22 February, before the pandemic made official headlines. Several art works shown at the exhibition were loaned from the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi. The Guardian noted about the exhibition as a 'Posthumous celebrations of two undervalued but extraordinary 20th-century artists' which, 'give them both the recognition they deserve'. This was the first solo exhibition of the artist to be held in Europe and the West, with a focus on his collages executed mainly between the late 1950s and the 60s after the artist lost his sight: the same period which is documented in Ray's film. Some of the artist's works were previously on view at the exhibition *Documenta 14* in Athens (2017) and at the Art Basel in 2019. In India, the artist has been the subject of a number of solo exhibitions including retrospectives in Calcutta (1959) and New Delhi (1963 and 1969), *Benodebehari Mukherjee: A Centenary Retrospective* at the Vadehra Art Gallery and the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi (2006–2007), *Between Sight and Insight: Glimpses of Benode Behari Mukherjee* also at the Vadehra Art Gallery in 2019; the artist has been also exhibited widely in themed exhibitions like *Santiniketan: The Making of Contextual Modernism*, also at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi (1997). Alongside the artist's own artworks, the exhibition in London also included black and white photographs shot during the making of Ray's film by the renowned

still photographer Nemai Ghosh. Benode Behari's works are today part of different collections all over the world, including: the Kala Bhavana Institute of Fine Arts, Santiniketan, India; the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi; Tate, England; and the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

As a backdrop to the development of Benode Behari's expressive style and experimentation with form, the exhibition's press-release situated the artistic ethos of Kala Bhavana or the Department of Fine Arts at Shantiniketan (which was yet to be transformed into the Visva Bharati³ University with a rigid curriculum structure by the University of Calcutta during the artist's younger days at the institution) as a development strongly reminiscent of the German Bauhaus tradition. An essay by Partha Mitter published in 2019 has shown how Shantiniketan was unique in its approach from the Weimar Bauhaus and how the influence of the latter on the development of Shantiniketan's curriculum is rather debatable⁴. Mitter also pointed out by citing a letter by Oskar Schlemmer from 1921 that at the Bauhaus itself, there were two main dominant but contradictory approaches: the first 'a form of holistic primitivism nourished by Eastern philosophy', while the second 'a Modernist commitment to progress and technology ...'. However around the time that Rabindranath Tagore visited Weimar, it was perhaps the former which was more in trend; because of the mentorship of 'kindred spirits' like Johannes Itten, Paul Klee and Oskar Schlemmer. While international developments in art, including the initial working philosophy of the Bauhaus⁵, might have influenced artistic fermentation in Shantiniketan, the artist Benode Behari's aesthetic perception and his views on art as a method situated at the cusp of imaging form as an innate humanistic quality, are certainly also products of the artist's fiercely independent and individualist evolution and assimilation of ideas of expression - one of the pillars of Shantiniketan's uniqueness and conducive environment. Mitter argued drawing from a 2013 exhibition held at the Bauhaus Foundation in Dessau titled *Das Bauhaus in Kalkutta: Eine Begegnung kosmopolitischer Avantgarden* which being the first such 'transcultural event in the history of Modernism' (p. 166) that the 1922 exhibition in Calcutta at the 14th annual exhibition of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, headed by the Tagore brother and one of the pioneers of Bengali Modernism, Abanindranath (around 250 paintings, including nine watercolours of Paul Klee, two watercolours by Wassily Kandinsky and by other teachers and students of the Bauhaus School of Design in Weimar were exhibited at this exhibition), through not situating itself as a passive recipient of an international art movement offered a chance of the formation of a Bakhtinian dialogic relationship in which the loci of knowledge become unopposed and in a mutually validating symbiotic relationship. It still remains to be assessed on how much direct impact the German Bauhaus tradition, which was also exhibited at the exhibition in Calcutta, on the art practices and curriculum at Kala Bhavana. What is noteworthy is that this was not a case of isolated influence by a dominant

³ Meaning 'the-world-in-a-nest'.

⁴ Though it is mentioned in the catalogue that Tagore visited the Weimar Bauhaus: this is actually debatable, as the subject is further explored in Partha Mitter's essay "Rabindranath Tagore and the Bauhaus: A Meeting of Minds" in *A Mediated Magic: The Indian Presence in Modernism 1880–1930*, Eds. Naman P. Ahuja, Louise Belfrage, The Marg Foundation & Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation, 2019, pp. 166-179.

⁵ Mitter aptly highlighted in his essay Oskar Schlemmer's reflection on the two main 'contradictory' philosophical underpinnings at the Weimar: the first 'a holistic primitivism nourished by Eastern philosophy' represented by the likes of Johannes Itten and which attempted at building ties with Tagore's Shantiniketan; and 'a Modernist commitment to progress and technology' advocated by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy who in 1923 took over charge from Itten.

international Modernist movement on non-Western art viewers and practitioners, but instead it can be situated neatly within the fabric of intellectual exchange and collaboration that Shantiniketan was part of, whereby the Tagorean vision of a holistic modern education undoubtedly forged a deep intellectual exchange with German intellectual life of the twentieth century, inspiring similar efforts elsewhere in the West, such as the Dartington Hall experiment of the noted British philanthropist and educationist Leonard K. Elmhirst.

Benode Behari, owing to his exposure to world art history and an internationally acclaimed curriculum that he received at Shantiniketan, was well familiar with Western art history by the time he was a mature artist. With the Renaissance masters and their art, whose magnanimity and scale of execution he admired, he couldn't draw any connection as he felt that the world around and of the Renaissance artists was different and essentially divergent from non-Western experiences of art and life. Benode Behari's aversion to high Renaissance art did not however lend him to any appreciation of Enlightenment thoughts like Cartesian limitation of experience or the antagonism towards nature and the irrational: any methodological expression of which in art he thoroughly detested and considered as alien to human nature. Vasarian art history⁶ has been the ground for the formation of the modern discipline of art history- a subject whose study was initiated in the subcontinent through a complex history of colonialism, Orientalism and Oriental antiquarianism. For it took a long time through the twentieth century for the category of 'modern art' to be inclusive of contemporary non-Western art practices, and Modernism was at times singularly represented by its scientific and technological advancement rather than the inclusive whole it is. In contemporary South Asian art-writing, as a matter of fact, this prolonged influence has today transformed into a situation where what passes as 'philosophy of art' has little attribution to formal engagement with the visual arts or an aesthetic⁷ (a term which itself means a range of different things today, many far removed from earlier implications of the term) approach, but is rather limited within normative teleological contextualism and historicism.

It is often remarked that Benode Behari symbolised a breakaway: a tradition which would be continued by many other Kala Bhavana Modernist stalwarts through the latter part of the twentieth century, from the rigid conventionalism and the mythological and historicist contextualism of the 'Bengal School'- which was essentially run from a verandah at the Jorsahanko residence of the family of the late Dwarkanath Tagore in Calcutta which functioned as an office, studio and space for intellectual discussions of the three elder Tagore brothers-

⁶ Recently, Georges Didi-Huberman explored the Vasarian conclusions on the glorification of Antiquity, the decay of the Middle Ages and the revival of philosophy in the High Renaissance (*rinascita*). He acknowledged and questioned the fundamental flaw in Vasari's Lives- the dogmatic and pedagogic documentation of the life of the artist in fifteenth-century Italy puritanised art as a device of knowledge rather than the image subsisting as a vehicle of thought as such. Huberman's perspective, nonetheless Occidental in endorsement and pre-dominantly Judeo-Christian in focus, brings together strands in the discourse for the purpose of a collective contemplation on the origin of the art-historical episteme.

⁷ The first distancing of 'aesthetics' as such, happened through narrow readings of the *Critique of Judgement* that placed Kant's conceptions of beauty only within the domain of twentieth century 'Aestheticism'- which was linked to the works of theorists like Clive Bell and Clement Greenberg. This essentially rendered the aesthetic approach as obsolete in non-Western histories of art. Twentieth century and contemporary 'aesthetics' and also philosophy of art could be radically reoriented if only the theorists with methodologies structured by rational paradigms opened up more to the contradictions presented by modernity. The possibility exists today for the most contextually rooted and historically-minded of thinkers to have a deep engagement with aesthetics.

Abanindranath, Gaganendranath and Samarendranath. The young Benode Behari, who looked up to them as the masters of their time, was once sent here with a painting to get some comments on his works: an event vividly remembered in his autobiography. While being a pupil of the renowned and rigorous Nandalal Bose at Kala Bhavana, even though he shared a generational schism with the practices of the earlier maestros, his initial training were through the hands of the best Modernist artists of Bengal in the early twentieth century, often collectively called the 'Bengal school' and his artistic pedagogy was shaped during this period along the same tradition of Shantiniketan's highly structured and disciplined yet liberal curricula. Though Nationalism remained a recurring undercurrent in the artistic and intellectual turf at Shantiniketan during Benode Behari's younger days; by the time Benode Behari appeared as a mature artist in the art scene, it now extended to materialise not only a drawing of a trajectory from tradition to modernity for inculcating an artistic awareness with both mythology and the rich art and cultural history of ancient India, but also the development of artistic languages, idioms and methods that can be seen as apt articulations of Modernist art practices, in the light of global developments in the field, but unique to the subcontinent's world of experience. Thus the shift from the earlier preoccupations of artistic practice at Shantiniketan is not as much contrary to the art practice of artists like Benode Behari but is representative of the fact that the earlier art of the 'Bengal school' was germinal to the inspiration of the individual artistic expressions of different Shantiniketan artists (and others as by that time Modernist art practices has well extended to different parts of India beyond Shantiniketan; notable among which in the Bengal scene were the works of some Calcutta-based visual artists now known as the 'Calcutta Group') throughout the twentieth century. Similarly, Benode Behari's later contemporaries at Shantiniketan like the artist and the noted Indian sculptor Ramkinkar Baij heralded even newer experimentations with form and expression in the plastic arts: continuing a tradition from the institution's inception in 1901 to a time when the waves of international art movements regularly settled at the shores of Shantiniketan starting from the influence of: the representation of working classes in Edouard Lanteri's Modelling, the works of the American-British sculptor Jacob Epstein, the art of the Russian futurists, Picasso, Brancussi and Social Realism to the Vorticists, the post-Bourdelleian imagination of the flexibility of form and also, primitivism. The development of Benode Behari's artistic consciousness can be similarly situated in the fertile environment of Shantiniketan for intellectual and artistic growth in the midst of nature but connected and in constant dialogue with global discourse on art and craft. While Ramkinkar's works were exhibited at the Salon des Mere and the Salon des Réalité Nouvelle in Paris in the 1950s, Benode Behari was not exhibited in the West during his lifetime in any solo show.

In the Grafton St. exhibition, in addition to the collages and photographs, several lithographs and line drawings in ink and pastel were also put on view. The collages, a medium described in the exhibition's press release as that which 'fills negative space' and reminiscent of Henri Matisse's paper-cuts, nonetheless were the main attraction at the event. Even in Ray's film, the intricate artistic engagement behind the making of collages by the artist is documented: the original paper cuts were replaced by ceramic tiles and can be still be viewed on the walls of Kala Bhavana. In the exhibition, a photograph in black and white (Fig. 1), also by Nema Ghosh which captured Ray photographing the artist in work on his collages indeed stood out. Benode Behari's remarkable experimentation with form in these collages, which represent a recognition of life-force and a spontaneous freezing of the most essential quality of a subject on frame from day to day life- translated in simple visual idioms thereby successfully capturing the uniqueness of such quintessence as well as a deep aesthetic subtext. The works were



Fig. 3. *Reclining Man*. Collage on paper. 7 1/2 x 9 inches (19.1 x 22.9 cm). 1957. Image courtesy: Mrinalini Mukherjee Foundation and David Zwirner Gallery.

spaciously arranged in linear groups of twos and threes for optimum effect of curatorial interventions such as that of encouraging an unhampered visual dialogue between the seer and the seen, which remains unrealized within the clustered and cluttered spatiality of the visual world of modernity and is an implicit condition to view the artist's works, and capturing the play of depth of field. For Benode Behari, to whom objective detachment from a work of art or a subject of art was not as much appealing as the stance of subjective disinterestedness, it was deemed essential for the 'objective' in the perception, apprehension and comprehension (in the Kantian sense) of art to facilitate such subject-object communication. The collages *Reclining Man* (Fig. 3), which was depicted on the exhibition's flyer, and *Goat* (not dated) are examples of the use of form and volume to convey a momentary yet closer to truth, identity of *being* that seems lost in the conventional appearances of formal or figural representation. The *Reclining Man* (1957), alongside is an example of the levels of multilayered meaning achievable for fostering a stimulating Modernist dialogue with the normative notions of society and human identity, rooted in the realization of the the artist's quest for similitude within global experiences of modernity and the commonality of experiential truth. In *Collage With Fish* (1958), the artist employs linearity and colour instead of form or volume to give representation to a mundane phenomenon and the aesthetic overtures of the mundane, which if aptly captured and translated, becomes a tight visual metaphor situated in the vast semantic web of the modern condition's constructs of the 'unique' and the 'mundane'. In some other

pieces like *3 PM* (1965) and a group of collages titled *Untitled* (not dated), the artist's profound



Fig. 4. *Dancer*. Ink on paper. 13 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches (34.3 x 24.1 cm). Not dated. Image courtesy: Mrinalini Mukherjee Foundation and David Zwirner Gallery.

understanding of form is further exemplified through the use of the abstract. The pure-abstract, for Benode Behari, is the suited and tested vehicle to chart into the unexplored territories of visual language that figural representation considerably limits. At the same time, rather than viewing the abstract as an acquired or complex method, for him it was a primordial language innate to the human urge for expression and creativity. Everyday objects and a unique artistic perception of these that amplifies the method as a variable and a constant at the same time, when represented as an underlying principle of the division and coalescence of space and the field of communication- successfully at most times, forging an instant relation of representational intimacy with the viewer's gaze. Other than a lithograph in colour dating from the mid-late 1960s (*Untitled*, not dated) which is again an experimentation with shape and volume and can be grouped within Benode Behari's abstract works, the rest of the pieces in the exhibition- ink and pastel drawings on paper as well as some lithographs, executed only with free moving lines, often executed with a permanent marker by the artist, tread the fine line between abstract and the figurative. Most of these ink-on-

paper line drawings are untitled. Many of the artworks in the exhibition are in fact not signed or dated. While the Benode Behari's sense of the significance of the anonymity of the artist, in the tradition of subcontinental art practice, as well as later being emulated by other Kala Bhavana artists like Ramkinkar, emphasised the importance of the process of art making and every aspect or artistic production to forge a direct resonance with one's idea of truth and similitude. Thus even though highly aware of the implications of authorship in the modern times and the due importance placed upon signed artworks by art historians, he actively refrained from signing many of his works. Simultaneously, albeit the absence of a signature, the quality of line or form and the strength of free flowing spontaneous artistic imagination denoted often by a single line bestows upon Benode Behari's works a mark of an auteur,

identifiable by anyone familiar with his artistic idiom. Three ink-on-paper drawings, titled *Dancer* (not dated) (Fig. 4) shows a remarkable innovation by the artist whereby line is employed to not just convey formal and structural approaches to a figure but also to capture the rhythm and liveliness of bodily movement (with an awareness of its rich history in ancient India art) to amplify the essence of figural representation in a non-figural drawing. In the Indian Bhramanical *śāstras*, the plastic arts are not concretely distinguished from the fine and performative arts⁸; most Indian *śilpāśāstras* or treatises and prescriptions on art contain information on a range of different subjects: all forming part of the world of art in its entirety. For Benode Behari, in line with the subcontinent's philosophies of art, artistic practice was *sadhanā* (quest) which primarily aims at bringing the 'inwardly known' truth-knowledge-purity aspect (*jñāna-sattva-rūpa*) outside in a manner of contemplation and application of method. Since knowledge is considered threefold in Indian metaphysics- of the sensible, of the intelligible, and anagogic or transcendent; of which the first two is not considered true knowledge in the metaphysical sense and called *avidyā*, while the last is true knowledge (*vidyā*) immediate and absolute. This is the process of acquiring the quality of *sadrśya* or semblance (similitude) with the 'perfect form' and art as a 'perfect method' of self-realisation for the artist. In his autobiography, titled *Chitrakar*, the artist thus noted:

From the scientific viewpoint we can designate the geometric form as a simple and bare image of nature, nothing more. This concept has no great value from the Eastern viewpoint. In Eastern art, tension and rhythm are signified through abstract qualities and they are expressed through *sadrśya* ... no art form can be totally objective ... In Europe ... the attitude is totally analytical. In the East, abstraction is a special kind of intuition ... a new kind of realisation or awareness. (p. 157)

Achieving *sadrśya* through his art practice remains a primary goal for the artist throughout his mature career.

The experience of nature and the chance to spend time in nature away from Calcutta during his childhood profoundly shaped Benode Behari's identity as an artist and his relationship with art in his later years. This was largely made possible by his visits along with his mother to one of his elder brothers who was employed as a railway doctor being posted at different locations in rural eastern Bengal. Accompanying his brother, Benode Behari who was deemed unfit for conventional school education by his family owing to health complications at an early age in which he was blinded in one eye and rendered myopic in the other, travelled to the countryside for the first time. He lived with his mother and brother at Godagari, a small settlement of the banks of the river Padma in Rajshahi district followed by a tenure at a town called Paksi or Paksey in Pabna district of undivided Bengal. Following his return to Calcutta, he was enrolled at Shantiniketan and its newly opened Kala Bhavana: after his knack for painting and the visual arts was discovered and he was to be trained here rigorously over the years under the tutelage of one of the foremost pupils and collaborators of Abanindranath Tagore, the Bengali master of modern painting and illustrations, Nandalal Bose. Nandalal's artistic practice and discipline had a long-lasting impact on the development of Benode Behari's artistic aptitude and aesthetic sensibility. However, being born in Behala, a suburb in the heart of Calcutta and trained by modern masters of the craft at Shantiniketan, Benode Behari's engagement

⁸ The *Citrasūtra* of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* (an important text elaborating on the practice of the visual arts in ancient India) states *Yathā nrttite tathā citre* (as in dance, so in the visual arts). See Dave-Mukherji, *Citrasūtra*, Adhyaya 35 and verse 5, pp. 2–3.

with art is often constricted to being studied as an urban-centric Modernist phenomenon. In fact, Benode Behari eschewed metropolis centred Modernism and his views on Modernist practices were in fact, to a large extent shaped by the countryside and natural immensity of rural Bengal. In his autobiography, the artist also noted:

Man's relationship with nature is not as close now as it was in the prehistoric age. The reason is that, till the advancement of science, nature was to man the source of many kinds of power ... For a large part of nature's mysteries have been unravelled by science . All the same, in literature and art, we still come across nature in its immensity ... In the presence of nature we feel liberated from these. So in artistic creativity the influence of nature is as inevitable as society's. (p. 129)

For the artist, it was a constant quest for a unifying truth that could explain a unity in variety and the common origin of all form, that led him to explore the arts, artistic methods and philosophy from all over the world, especially from the world of Eastern arts and aesthetics- to which he felt more familiar and close. A deep engagement with metaphysical thought that underlined the aesthetic principles often found and practiced in Eastern schools of art allowed him to penetrate experientially to the core of formal expression. He was born into a Hindu Brahmin family and was encouraged as a child to study Sanskrit, the scriptures and classical literature; and grew up in an environment of learning and austerity. It was certainly the privilege offered by the caste system which allowed the young artist to assimilate knowledge from his fertile surroundings. The impact of this training in philosophical and religious literature during his homeschooling which opened up to him the path to Indian philosophy, would remain a lifelong intellectual and practical anchor in Benode Behari's artistic consciousness. His inspiration were not confined just to Indian thought either. On Chinese art and thought, the artist wrote:

In Taoism the forms of nature, mountains, rock, water, all animals and living things are the symbol of the Law... The tradition of landscape painting grew up in China under the influence of Lao Tsu's teaching and the Taoist doctrine ... The inclusion of human figures in their landscapes was to evoke the feeling that man is an onlooker in this world perceived the senses and his coveted objective is to merge himself into it and realise 'Nothingness' ... which was similar to the search of *nirguna brahman*. (p. 177)

It was not only Chinese art, Shantiniketan during that time served as a potpourri of different cultures and traditions of the Orient: among which that of the Japanese played a significant role. Students at Kala Bhavana were exposed to the most recent techniques and methods in art alongside a curriculum which fostered holistic assimilation as well as the freedom of individual expression. Benode Behari took an active interest in calligraphy and acquired skills from Japanese practitioners of the art who were visiting Shantiniketan. He had visited Japan

during 1937-38 and established important connections with notable artists like Kampō Arai



Fig. 5. On the sets of *The Inner Eye*. Benode Behari Mukherjee at work on his mural *Figures in various postures* at the Kala Bhavana. Photo by Nemaï Ghosh. Image courtesy: Mrinalini Mukherjee.

(1878-1945) and art-historians alongside further cultivating his taste of Japanese art and his knowledge of Japan's long and rich history of aesthetic thought. He was especially influenced by the Japanese ink painter Sesshū Tōyō (1420-1506) and the Japanese master of the 'boneless technique' Tawaraya Sōtatsu (c. 1576-1645) and was deeply influenced by the writings of the art historian and philosopher Okakura Kakuzō (1862-1913). It is due to this extensive process of assimilation and study of the important metaphysical precepts of all cultures that led the artist to use words like *chi* and *rāsa* almost interchangeably, in his talks and writings.

The vicinity of nature that Benode Behari enjoyed during his childhood, was again made possible by the location of Shantiniketan in the hinterlands of Birbhum⁹. The rugged lands of Birbhum district has also played the role of a certain kind of muse for the film-maker Satyajit Ray, decidedly urbane and otherwise attributing his artistic pedagogy to the metropolis of Calcutta. It was at Shantiniketan where Ray for the first time experienced a world outside of the city, met the poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore and amassed influences from stalwarts of the Bengal school of art. Ray's first feature film *Pather Panchali* was released in 1955, almost a decade after Partition; and for him the experiential world of the Partition was limited to the happenings in the city of Calcutta. Although his ancestral lineage goes back to the eastern

⁹ A district in the state of West Bengal, India bordering present day Jharkhand. It is where Debendranath Tagore established his ashram of the Brahmosamaj in 1863, after taking the land on lease from a local landlord. Rabindranath started his experiment of holistic education *par excellence* here starting from around 1901.

Bengal, Ray never had been there and by the time he started his film career it was a different country; thus the quintessential Bengali director was separated and had no experiential grounding in the countryside of Bengal- imaginations of which nonetheless recur in his films. Unlike Ritwik Ghatak¹⁰, the impact of Partition on rural Bengal is not explicitly evident in Ray's films and cinematic language; however, the 'other' of the city, that which stands in opposition to the values of metropolis-centric Modernism was located by Ray in the countryside of



Fig. 6. *Figures in various postures*, Ceramic tiles set against plastered wall with coloured mortar. 1972. Kala Bhavana at Visva Bharati University. Photo by author, 2019.

Birbhum. Shantiniketan being at the helm of numerous intellectual and cultural fermentations in Bengal around that time provided an apt medium for Ray to expand his artistic vision and practice; while the natural world of Birbhum¹¹ lent the young filmmaker what was amiss in his city-centric Modernist perspective. For Ray, who was always interested in the fine arts, was acquainted with Shantiniketan since his childhood, but was never ready to sacrifice the urban lure of Calcutta, until in 1940 when overcoming much reluctance he joined the Visva Bharati for a short period of time. It was during this time that he came in close contact with the Shantiniketan community and actively assimilated all the inspirations that drew him- starting from an appreciation of Oriental art to the innovations of Nandalal Bose and the unique Modernist spirit of Benode Behari.

While the exhibition in London certainly marked the beginning of a new era in the international reception of the artist's works and highlighted the need for scholarly reassessment of the intellectual engagement of the artist with the experiential conditions of modernity and Modernist thought in the twenty-first century, it presented the possibility of opening up new debates in the light of Indian Modernism and its aesthetic underpinnings, which could have been further explored or representationally substantiated at the show. The inclusion of

¹⁰ Being true to the spirit of Bengali new wave cinema of the latter half of the twentieth century that was promulgated by Ray, which envisioned the cinema as a modern medium which must be turned into an apt vehicle of conveying modern sensibilities without severing ties with a complex tradition of art and culture and an equally rich tradition of man's coexistence with nature immanent in the countryside of Bengal- most of which was lost physically by Indian new wave film-makers due to the Partition, Ghatak too made an unfinished film on the artist Ramkinkar, titled *Ramkinkar*.

¹¹ The 1973 film *Ashani Shanket* was also extensively shot in Birbhum: best remembered perhaps by shots of the actor Soumitra Chatterjee in front of the twin eighteenth century terracotta Śiva temples near Bolpur. Alongside *Ashani Shanket*, *Agantuk* (1991) and *Abhijaan* (1962) were also shot at different outdoor locations in Birbhum district.

representations of his murals¹² would have added to the completeness of the exhibition as, as an artist, Benode Behari's corpus cannot be fully understood or put into perspective without an appreciation of his mural works. The transition from the 'objective' to the 'abstract', which for Benode Behari, was a realization that precipitates in his artworks as a constant tension between line, colour and form: that essentially composes the 'rhythm' his artworks are often attributed to; as for him both were inter-related categories and one couldn't be complete without the other, making the idea of a 'pure objective' as delusional and an unsolicited bane of modernity on an artist's perception and psyche. The artist's deep understanding and the bridging of the world of experience and that of art, post his impairment of vision, has been a recurrent theme in the previous century and in the twenty-first, shaping most curatorial and art historical engagements with the works of the artist. While *Inner Eye* was an artistic engagement at its heights, through the medium of film with the artistic individuality and insight of Benode Behari's art practice; *After Sight* is not as much a retrospective show of the artist's life and works: as the exhibition's title might tend to suggest, rather it implicates a lasting legacy of the artist's works, which are as much relevant to our experiential world situated in modernity as it was during the artist's lifetime and offers a relook at the artist's extensive realization of form and artistic far-sightedness.

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¹² A medium that Benode Behari was adept at, as a prodigy of his master Nandalal Bose, but which did not form part of this exhibition, was that of mural-making: some of the best examples of which can today be seen at Shantiniketan: at Cheena Bhavana and Hindi Bhavan and at Banasthali Vidyapith in Rajasthan. Benode Behari made new innovations and breakthroughs in spatial organisation as well as formal representation in his murals, which were ahead of his time in subcontinental art practice.