

The Objectives of Establishing Art Schools in Colonial India by the British

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Abstract

Although the history of art in India is very old, art education was included in the academic curriculum during the colonial rule, under the British, in the 19th century. Although earlier, especially in miniature painting, many artists worked under the master painter in 'Tasbirkhana'. All these artists used to learn method and techniques of art from the main artist as apprentices and considered him as the master. Basically, through visual experience and regular work, step by step they were able to grasp the simple to complex aspects of the techniques of making images. But by opening art schools for a specific purpose by the British, art education was included in the syllabus of those schools. Even salaried teachers who controlled the academic structure had been appointed of those schools. Four art schools were opened in Madras, Calcutta, Bombay and Lahore at the four ends of the Indian subcontinent at this time. The original purpose of setting up these schools was to train Indians in technical education such as carpentry, masonry, printing, and leather work. That is, the real goal was to make skilled craftsmen, not to make artists. But at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, a renaissance in art education took place in search of the traditional culture of India under the encouragement of E.B Havell, then Superintendent of the Art School of Calcutta. This new shift in academic art education and the introduction of indigenous sentiment into students' artwork in this system is an important concern to discuss.

Keywords: Art schools, Academic Art education, Naturalism, Artisans, British rule, Freedom movement, Indigenous tradition, Cultural identities.

Introduction

Till the 16th century, the most important centers of art in Europe were Rome and Florence. From the 17th century, the French emperor, Louis XIV, made Paris the Mecca of art. In this century, under through royal patronage, literature, architecture and science academies were established. In 1648 was founded the Academie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture or the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. This institute was a bureaucratic organisation under the command of the royal court. Expounding the glory and nobility of the taste of the King was the sole motive of this institution. In this academy, the central focus of the artists was to create history painting. But portrait painting was

also in vogue. Painting of landscapes was rare, or landscapes used to paint as the background of main characters. [1]

There was no distinction between fine arts and crafts before Renaissance in Europe. At that time, to the Greeks all handmade works was considered as 'Techne'. The purpose of opening art schools by the British was to provide academic education to create skilled artisans. It was not their intention to create artists. In this case, the similarity of thought with the French and British academy was seen. The main purpose of art education in colonial era in this subcontinent was to meet the technical needs of government offices. In art schools, carpentry and

masonry were taught to students. It is also known that students of arts school used to engage in work like plastering and painting for houses for earning. In 1839, the Mechanics Institute was opened in Kolkata on the model of London's Mechanics Institute for the purpose of making professional craftsman. In 1853, and Indian businessman, Sir Jamshedji Jeejeebhoy, donated one lakh rupees to the company's government for the purpose of establishing a technical school in Bombay. And in this regard, in a letter written to the Governor of Bombay, he requested to bring suitable teachers from England. Although Jamshedji did not want the aesthetic development of the students, rather he wanted to develop technical education. The advice of **Dr. Alexander Hunter**, a skilled artist, was adopted when the school opened. He opines,

1. Best samples of local manufacture should first be collected;
2. Arrangements should be entered into for having them taught on a liberal and extended scale and keeping in view the improvement of the manufacture by application of science art and machinery;
3. European and Native workmen should be employed where knowledge of particular mode of manufacture could be derived for benefit;
4. The pupil should work gratis for the first two years till he became fit to earn –“Until they gained sufficient proficiency and if they could not pay tuition fees”.
5. A small percentage of profit should be paid to apprentice after eighteen months if they showed quick development;
6. Exchange of artistic design with similar schools in other countries should be done;
7. The committee on Management should be composed of leading members of different ranks in society;
8. Head of local Government should be the patron; and
9. Qualified Europeans should be employed for leading branches of instruction. [2]

Facts, Sources & Critical analysis

The Renaissance painters, instead of producing diagrammatic art in the Byzantine or Gothic fashion, attempted to depict, in painting and sculpture, the ideal beauty of the human form. From the renaissance period the study of antiques as a part of art education had begun. At that time, there was no distinction between fine arts and crafts. In the 18th century, in the culture and daily lives of European people, a great change took place. The French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution were responsible for these. On the one hand, while mechanised production became popular, on the other hand, in the various countries of Europe, French art, literature, culture, language and manners, were also being propagated. [3]

In 1795, for training in mechanized craftsmanship, the Ecole Polytechnic was established in Paris. In emulation of this, in Scotland and England, the Mechanix Institute was founded. Here the trainees were to be trained to produce of objects of daily use. These were part of industrial art. Segregation was attempted by adding the words 'Beaux Arts' in an art education academy for the elite. [4]

From the middle of 19th century, in British-rule, subservient Indians, who, roused from their longstanding sense of inferiority, manifested awareness of their own history and traditions. For the first time in India, transcending political and social boundaries, the kind of awareness or the sense of patriotism developed about own traditions and practices. Historian **Ranajit Guha** has written in this context,

“Mobilisation, we have noticed, was an issue of prestige for Indian nationalism as it matured into a mass political phenomenon during the first half of the twentieth century. Under whose banner would the people rally? Who was to speak for them? A response to such questions was regarded as a critical measure of the support commanded by the congress party in its claim to hegemony- a claim it pressed

vigorously and relentlessly at every forum and by all means of publicity at its disposal not only against the colonial regime but also against all its indigenous rival such as the Muslim League and some of the left-nationalist and socialist parties.

An outstanding feature of this hegemonic claim was the uses it made of the Indian past. The idioms of such use would differ according to tendencies prevailing within the nationalist ideology at any given time and the inclinations of its principal protagonists. With Rabindranath Tagore, for instance, the emphasis came to rest on an idealized past in which an autonomous and self-reliant civil society lived in peace with itself. With Gandhi, on the other hand, all that was good and great about that past lay in its spiritual achievements and moral superiority; with Nehru in the secular unity of its politics and the synthesis of its diverse cultures." [5]

Kolkata was the capital of the British Raj in India. Hence, for governance needs, here in the capital city, several Government offices, law courts, police stations, schools and colleges had been opened. To train clerks for administrative work, by teaching them the English language, was the foremost objective of the British. It was against this backdrop that a few English-educated, meritorious youth, raised the call for 'renaissance'. The art education institute was established in Kolkata, in 1854. Since the people of Kolkata had the opportunity to be educated at the schools and colleges established by the Government, hence, the progressive, thoughtful, Bengali youth of Kolkata played a leading role in this 'renaissance'. Till the mid-19th century, Indian painters were regarded as artisans. The recognition as 'artists' was meant only for the resident foreign artists in India. However, many of the Indian artisans engaged themselves in various craftsmanship, voluntarily learned the nuances of oil painting, and those of metal and wood engraving and lithography for printing, with the expectation of better

employment. Most of these craft persons belonged to the class of potters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths or carpenters. From the beginning of the 19th century, with the rise of the printing industry, these craft persons from various fields began to participate in printing with the hope of a change in fortune. With the flourishing of printing in the bazaars printing, the quantity and value of the work of these artist/craft persons was on the rise. From the middle of the 19th century, it was from the images created by bazaar artists/crafts persons, that the emergence of a 'new' kind of art was visible. Since, the Indian artists, in their compositions, used stories and characters from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas* and the *Mangal-Kavyas*, with the primary objective of exploring tradition, hence, these gods and goddesses, as popularised by those texts, featured in large numbers in their prints and gained tremendous popularity. [6]

The triumph of academic art teaching in India ensued, in 1850, with the establishment of the art school in Madras, by **Alexander Hunter** and 4 years later in Kolkata, in 1854. The teaching methods used there, were completely in the fashion of the **Royal Academy of Arts, London**. Most of the teachers in Government art schools established by the British in colonial India were European and believers in the traditional education patterns of The Royal Academy of Arts, London. The Royal Academy of Arts, London was established in 1768, under the patronage of King George III. The then famous artist, Joshua Reynolds, was the first President of the institute. He was a practitioner of landscape painting in the naturalistic style. It is believed that he determined British academic art practices with the inception of conventional art practices akin to renaissance traditions in this academy. In British India too, the rulers were enthusiastic about establishing similar education of art. In the art education centres, founded in the 19th century in Kolkata, Madras, Bombay and Lahore, students were trained keeping the Royal Academy's art education practices as the primary

yardstick. The first institute of art education, the Mechanical Institute, was established in Kolkata in 1839. The classes were conducted in the Town Hall. In 1854, The School of Industrial Art was established at Garanhata. Regarding the academic practices at the art schools established in Kolkata, **Mrinal Ghosh** opines,

"Henry Hover Locke, the superintendent of London School of Design was assigned the charge of the school on 29th June, 1864. At Kensington academic naturalism of Joshua Reynolds style was the primary norm of art practice, though other artist in England during that time were trying to come out of the strict norm of naturalism, movements of Turner and the pre- Raphaelite artists being the examples. Locke was not sympathetic to those new trends. Consequently, those were not considered for imparting art education at Calcutta. Academic naturalism was taken up as the only norm, which continued unabated till 1896." [7]

Artist Shyamacharan Srimani, resident of Kolkata, in the 19th century, translated fine arts as '*sukhho shilpo*'. The technique of art education in the academic tradition was acquired by the British from Italy and France. Moreover, before William Hogarth in the 18th century, no significant British artists are known. In 1768 in England, the Royal Academy was established on the lines of the French Academy. The Chairmanship of this Academy was first assigned to the artist, Joshua Reynolds. The students here were taught history painting or literature painting in an academic manner, and they were encouraged to paint such images. In 1837, at Kensington, London, the **Government School of Design** was founded. It was later, in 1896 renamed the **Royal College of Art**. In 1967, the institute was formulated into a university of art. The 23 year-old, **E.B Havell**, qualified from this School of Design, was sent to India as the Superintendent of the Madras School of Art. By establishing art education institutes in British-dominated India, the former attempted to impart industrial art education.

To produce knowledgeable artists was not the intention. In 1839, in an assembly of a few Britishers and educated Indians, at the Town Hall in Kolkata, a Mechanical Institute in the city was established. Though short-lived, but the establishment of this as an academic art education institute, was the very first initiative in the Subcontinent. After a few years, in 1854, on the lines of the Mechanical Institute, the School of Industrial Art was established in Kolkata as a center for art education. Before that, in 1850, with the same motive, that is the improvement of fine art, in Madras, in South India, the East India Company's revered doctor and art-enthusiast, Alexander Hunter took the initiative to host a similar assembly in the city to establish the Madras School of Industrial Art. After being taken over by the government, in 1862, this institute was renamed Government School of Art and Craft. In a few years following this, in Bombay in 1857, under the initiative of **Jamsetjee Jeejebhoy**, an art school was established. During the founding of this institute, he himself donated a sum of 1 lakh rupees. In 1865, John Griffiths was selected as the Principal of this institute and in 1866. Similarly, at Lahore, in the Punjab province, in 1875, the Mayo School of Industrial Art was established. John Lockwood Kipling joined as its first Principal and as the first curator of the Lahore Museum. Later, in 1958, the institute was renamed National College of Art. Just as in the 19th century, with the purpose of occupying low ranking clerical jobs, educational institutions were opened up; similarly art education institutes were being founded in British dominated India, with the aim of building indigenous crafts persons. [8]

Before the establishment of art education institutes by the British in India, Indian art was already developing under the influence and inspiration of British and other European artists, who had come India to earning a livelihood. Native artists, right after the formation of the East India Company, began painting under British artists and professionals, with the purpose of earning their

livelihood. After the establishment of the art school, for nearly 50 years, the students were trained in European art practices, and owing to their success, this foreign artistic trend became deep-rooted in India. But at the beginning of the 20th century, some thinkers embarked on the search for an art that was related to India's own heritage. Of them, **E.B Havell** was unique. In 1884, Havell came to India as the Superintendent of the **Madras School of Art**. Later he held the same post at the art school in Kolkata, where he remained from 1896-1909. Despite being a British himself, he objected strongly to the presence of South Kensington art practices in the art educational schools in India, taking certain steps to discourage students from the influence and usage of alien art practices. [9]

Actually, when the British established the art school in Kolkata, their purpose was merely to create craftsman. They were not objected strongly to the presence of South Kensington art practices in the art educational schools in India, taking certain steps to discourage students from the influence and usage of alien art practices. He was an admirer of the ornamental design used in ancient Indian architecture and sculpture. In his search for materials for authentic Indian art, he found in these designs, the pathway to a possibility. At the art school in Kolkata, he began classes in decorative design, fresco painting, wood and glass work. Since, he was open-minded, doing away with the distinction between fine art and applied art, he laid emphasis on the practices of traditional design and ornamentation in India. He laid emphasis on turning of the focus back to Indian handicrafts, ornamentation in temples, *alpona* and folk art. He was not only to alert improving craftsmanship skills through emulation of European art objects, but also on laying emphasis on the intellectual development of the students at the art school, who aspired to the echelons of 'high art' in Europe. Collecting various art objects reflective of the identity and heritage of Indian art, he built an art collection at the college. Here, he collected several

Mughal miniature paintings, along with copies of images from the frescoes of Ajanta. Later, in 1904, when the government proposed to merge this collection with the art section of the Indian Museum, he objected. He had, really, built this collection to facilitate art education. Hence, he was reluctant. They were not motivated by the aim of formulating an indigenous Indian artistic practice, through training in Indian culture and tradition. For this reason, the name of the art school held the word 'craft'. Besides, it was established at Chitpur for the first time with the mindset of training craftsmen only. Nearly 200 people enrolled here for the first time, and most of them were local wood-block makers, wood & metal engravers, blacksmiths, goldsmiths and carpenters. [10].

Concluding observation

It can be said that the British deliberately set up art schools in India for the purpose of producing artisans and in the decades following the establishment of the school, they succeeded in that purpose well. Artisans passed from these art schools were in demand in the society. Apart from working under the British government, some of the students who passed out from these schools opened their own businesses. Even some of the Indian students who passed out from here were later employed as teachers in the schools. However, this tradition has changed since the beginning of the twentieth century. Indigenous traditional cultural identities continue to be seen in the visuals produced by the students here. The freedom movement across the country had a direct impact on arts education and a kind of indigenous sentiment fueled a change in the course of colonial art education.

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