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Colonialism, Revival and Aesthetics: Understanding of Indian Art through Nihar Ranjan Ray

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Abstract

This paper explores the artistic approach of Nihar Ranjan Ray, a prominent Indian historian and art critic whose work significantly shaped the discourse on Indian aesthetics and art history. Ray, born in 1903 in Bengal, was deeply influenced by the cultural resurgence of the Bengal Renaissance and the efforts to revive Indian art traditions. His writings offer critical insights into the socio-political impact of British colonialism on Indian art, lamenting the imposition of Western aesthetic standards. Ray championed the Bengal School of Art, particularly the works of Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose, for their dedication to reviving India's ancient art forms. Beyond his praise for these revivalists, Ray also critiqued contemporary Indian society's disconnect from its cultural roots, arguing that genuine appreciation of Indian art requires a deep engagement with India's spiritual and cultural traditions. His analysis of Rabindranath Tagore's paintings highlighted the artist's personal struggles with mortality and his search for peace, further exemplifying Ray's belief in the emotive and spiritual power of art. The paper underscores Ray's enduring influence on Indian art criticism, positioning him as a key figure in the country's cultural and intellectual history.

Keywords

Colonialism, Revival, Aesthetics, Indian art, Cultural roots.

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1. Introduction

Nihar Ranjan Ray¹ was a pivotal figure in the world of Indian art history, renowned for his deep insights into Indian aesthetics, art history, and cultural revivalism. Born on January 14, 1903, in Kayetgram, Bengal Province (now in Bangladesh), Ray emerged as an influential historian, writer, and thinker who contributed significantly to the understanding of Indian art. His career spanned many roles, including being the General Secretary of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta and the first Director of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. Though a historian by training, Ray's writings on art, particularly during the Bengal Renaissance, positioned him as a modern thinker who helped frame the cultural and artistic consciousness of India. His thoughts on the revival of Indian art, heavily influenced by the Bengal School and the works of Abanindranath Tagore, form an essential part of Indian aesthetics. His scholarship not only celebrates Indian art but critiques the socio-political dynamics that affected its evolution during British rule and beyond.

2. Historical and Educational Background

Nihar Ranjan Ray's journey in the world of scholarship began in his early education at Mrityunjay School and Anand Mohan College, Mymensingh. He graduated from Calcutta University in 1926, earning accolades such as the Mrinalini Gold Medal for excellence in Indian history and political studies. His academic interests were diverse, including ancient Indian history, political history, and art history. He received a Diploma in Library Science from the University of Lachchhan in 1936 and was appointed as the librarian of Calcutta University. Ray later became the Bagesvari Professor of Fine Arts at Calcutta University² in 1946, cementing his place in academia. He remained actively involved in the academic and

cultural discourse of the time, contributing to the intellectual awakening of India during the late colonial and early post-colonial periods.

Ray's involvement in the Quit India Movement of 1943-44, for which he was jailed, demonstrated his deep connection to the socio-political challenges of his time. His experiences of British colonialism profoundly influenced his views on the state of Indian art and culture. Ray's most important works include *Bangalir Itihas* (History of the Bengali People), *Sanskrit Buddhism in Burma*, and *Thought and Image in Indian Art*. For his contributions, Ray was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1969, and his legacy as a scholar, writer, and thinker continues to influence Indian art history.

3. Major Contributions & Writing Highlights

3.1 *Bangalir Itihas (Adi Parba)*³ - History of Bengalis: Early Period

This seminal work delves into the ancient period of Bengali history, laying out a comprehensive and scholarly narrative that marked a turning point in Bengali historiography.

First published in 1949, the book spans approximately 876 pages and has gone through multiple editions, such as the 1980 "Literacy Edition."

It is praised for its depth and clarity, uniquely weaving historical events, social practices, culture, religion, and causality into a cohesive narrative.

Roy's approach combines rigorous scholarship with literary elegance, making the text both authoritative and engaging.

3.2 Other Works

He authored more than 70 articles in English and 36 in Bengali, across genres such as essays, speeches, and literary criticism; additionally, he wrote 15 books in English and 7 in Bengali focusing on history and literature.

Roy's vast erudition spanned fields including arts, literature, religion, politics, and biography.

3.3 Artistry & Scholarship

Prior to his historical writings, Roy was celebrated as an art historian. His works "*Maurya and Sunga Art*", "*Brahmanical Gods*

in Burma - Indian Art and Iconography”, and “Sanskrit Buddhism in Burma” reflect his extensive research in art and iconography.

4. Significance & Legacy

Pioneer in Bengali Historiography: Roy is revered as “the first historian of ancient Bengal”, whose balanced, insightful, and causally nuanced approach shaped the field.

Bridging Disciplines: His scholarly rigor seamlessly merged historical analysis, literary flair, and cultural inquiry—a rare blend that set high standards in both academic and literary circles.

Enduring Influence: Especially through *Bangalir Itihas - Aadi Parba*, Roy inspired generations of readers and future historians, significantly expanding the discourse around Bengali identity and historiography.

5. Ray’s Views on Indian Art

Nihar Ranjan Ray’s approach to Indian art was shaped by the Bengal Renaissance, a period of cultural resurgence that aimed to revive the country’s ancient traditions and counter the colonial cultural onslaught. According to Ray, Indian art has always emphasized emotional and spiritual depth over intellectual detachment. He believed that art, in its highest form, connects individuals to divine beauty, offering a path to transcendence. For Ray, art was not merely about aesthetics or technique, but a reflection of the cultural and spiritual essence of society.

Ray lamented the influence of British colonialism on Indian art. He argued that the British sought to impose their values and aesthetic sensibilities on India, undermining traditional Indian art forms. As part of their colonial strategy, they established foreign art schools in India and encouraged the adoption of Western artistic practices, leading to a gradual decline in indigenous art forms. Ray’s critique highlighted how this imposition contributed to a sense of inferiority among Indian artists, many of whom adopted Western methods to gain recognition and legitimacy in the eyes of their colonial rulers.

It was in response to this cultural erosion that figures like E.B. Havell and Abanindranath Tagore spearheaded a revivalist movement known as the Bengal School of Art. Ray celebrated the Bengal School for its commitment to reviving ancient Indian art

traditions, particularly through the efforts of Abanindranath and his disciple Nandalal Bose. In his writings, Ray praised these two artists for creating a modern Indian school of painting that remained deeply rooted in the country's artistic heritage.

6. Ray's Critique of Contemporary Indian Society

Ray's thoughts on Indian art extended beyond artistic practice to include a critique of contemporary Indian society.⁴ He believed that modern India, particularly during the colonial period, suffered from a cultural dislocation. The disconnect between traditional Indian culture and the values imposed by colonialism created a society that was unsure of its identity. Ray argued that Indian critics of the time lacked the tools and perspective to engage meaningfully with Indian art because they were steeped in colonial frameworks. In his view, true appreciation of Indian art required a deep understanding of the country's cultural and spiritual traditions, something that was missing in much of the contemporary discourse.

Ray's critique was not limited to colonial influence; he also expressed frustration with the Indian intelligentsia of his time. He believed that the excessive sentimentalism and superficial jargon used in the criticism of Indian art prevented genuine understanding. He argued that most critics failed to grasp the essence of Indian art because they were disconnected from the country's cultural roots. Ray's writings serve as a call to return to these roots, to rediscover the depth and richness of Indian aesthetics.

7. Nihar Ranjan Ray on Rabindranath Tagore

Nihar Ranjan Ray's scholarship also extended to an analysis of the life and work of Rabindranath Tagore. In his book *A Commentary on the Life and Works of Rabindranath Tagore*, Ray delved into Tagore's artistic output, particularly his paintings. Ray observed that Tagore's art reflected a unique side of his personality, one that was often hidden from public view. Tagore's paintings, characterized by boldness, innocence, and occasional arrogance, offered a glimpse into the inner world of the artist, one that was marked by his confrontation with themes of pain, death, and transcendence.

Ray argued that Tagore's artistic process was spontaneous and intuitive, often completed in a single sitting. His use of various

materials-fountain pens, brushes, inks-reflected a sense of urgency and immediacy in his work. For Ray, Tagore's paintings were more than mere artistic expressions; they were deeply personal reflections of the poet's journey through life, his encounters with mortality, and his search for peace.

8. Conclusion

Nihar Ranjan Ray's contributions to Indian art history and aesthetics remain invaluable. His deep engagement with the Bengal School and his critique of the socio-political forces shaping Indian art offer a nuanced understanding of the country's artistic heritage. Ray's writings serve as a reminder that Indian art is not just a collection of beautiful objects, but a reflection of the country's spiritual and cultural identity. Through his work, Ray has provided a framework for understanding Indian art that transcends the limitations of colonial discourse, offering a vision of art as a means of cultural and spiritual revival. His critical insights continue to resonate with scholars, artists, and thinkers today, ensuring his place as one of the most important voices in Indian art history.

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