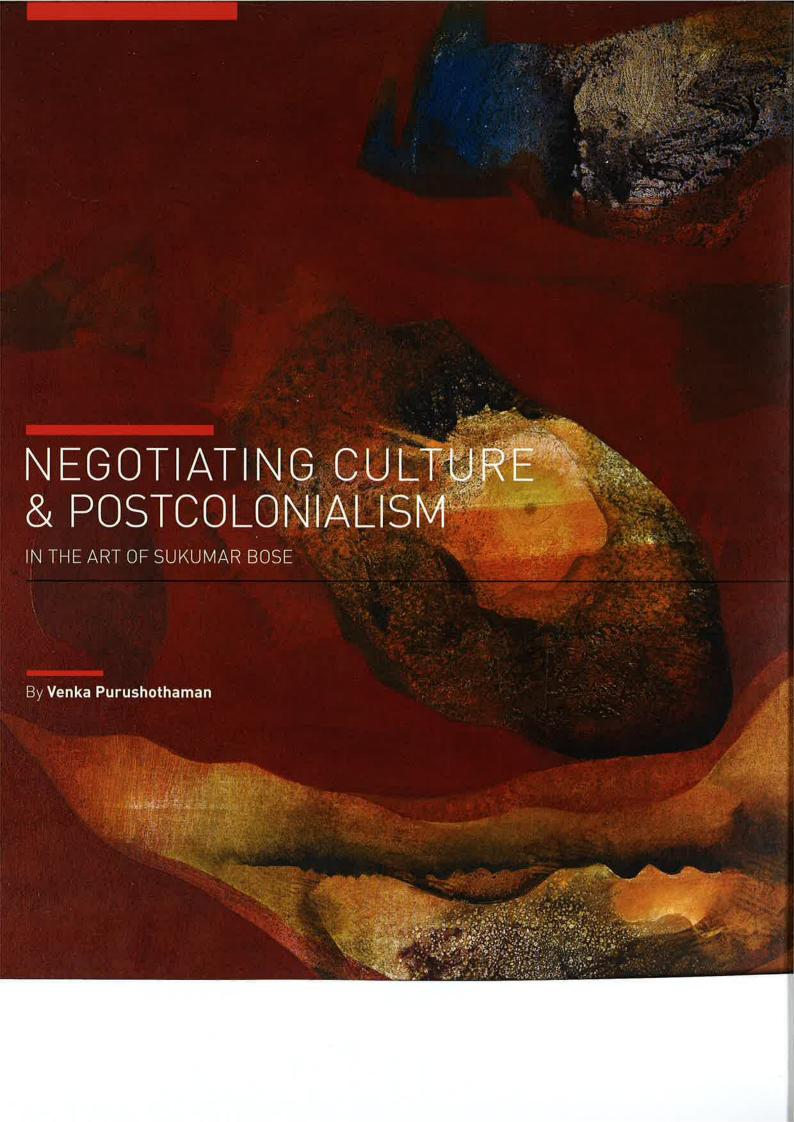# THE ART OF
SUKUMAR BOSE

REFLECTIONS ON SOUTH & SOUTHEAST ASIA

Edited by **Venka Purushothaman**

NEGOTIATING CULTURE & POSTCOLONIALISM

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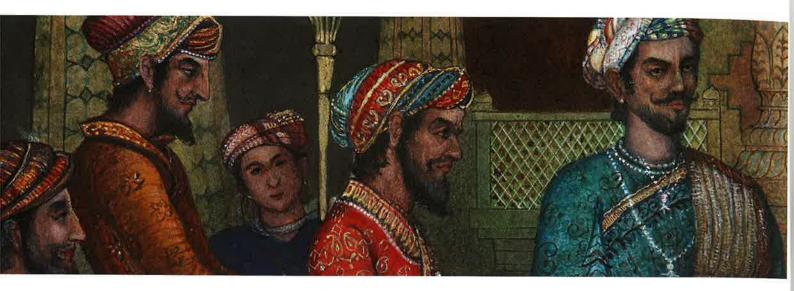
IN THE ART OF SUKUMAR BOSE

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Introduction

WRITERS ON THE art of India are numerous and whether they are enthusiasts or researchers they will be confronted by the extensive breadth and depth of the Indian civilization – from the Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa archeological sites through the Mughal intervention and timeless temple sculptures to precolonial and postcolonial India. This is, of course, complicated by the rich diversity of cultures, languages, practices, and notions of indigeneity which determine the subcontinent. Works of art continue to provide a visual historiography amidst readily available socio-cultural, political, economic and military histories and discourses and any attempt in threading these all together is a futile exercise. However, the collection of multiple planes of lived histories provides an ever-ready resource for reckoning. Artists have always created artworks that transcend human imagination, temporal relevance and spatial specificities. While artworks may be culturally specific in their production, their circulation transcends both cultural and geographical borders and belie in timelessness. In this regard, works such as Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker* (1902), the notable paintings of Maqbool Fida Husain (1915-2011) and Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) come to mind for their presence in the consciousness of the everyday.

Formal structures of western art training have colonized much of late nineteenth and twentieth century Asia's imagination. Artists from

Facing Page
(Detail) **Radha & Krishna**, 1960s
Watercolour, 12 x 14.5 in.
Private Collection

postcolonial societies confidently embrace this training through drawing, painting, sculpture and printmaking of landscapes, peoples and cultural iconography and write back the colonial inscription into a culturally specific one. Moreover, while the global art investment market has a plethora of art styles and practices to invest in, the representational and obvious, more so than the non-representation and abstract, have a lead in the marketplace. This alongside the strong narrative and storytelling structures inherent in Asian cultures clearly facilitates a greater preference for representational and realist works.

One of the particularities of large civilizations such as India and China is that one can find artists whose lives and works span and negotiate the impact of epochal systems of colonial, postcolonial and global spheres through their lived experiences. If at all, modern historiography has been embracing artists who transcend these spheres, giving voice and space to them in the annals of history. The necessary privileging of these voices has been at that heart of postcolonial discourse—succinctly engaged by eminent scholars such as Homi Bhabha and Ranajit Guha—especially as a means of resisting the canonical script of colonialism. While theoretically

it is plausible to locate artists within a convenient time-frame structure, I find that an appropriate paradigm within which to investigate artists' works would be transnational; that is, at points of relationships that transcend pre-existing boundaries of nations (real or imagined, psycho or social) creating new spatial logic of flows (Castells 1996). In this new space, new possibilities flower, as identities are re-negotiated. This is akin to the manner in which the literary device of magic realism creates an axis of multiple planes of existence to collide in a constellation of paradoxes that allows for the conception of alternative realities and perceptions.

Sukumar Bose

IT IS IN this frame of a new space that I seek to address the project at hand: artist Sukumar Bose (1912-1986) whose works meander through colonial, postcolonial India, and a neocolonialist sojourn into Southeast Asia. Born in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh in 1912, Bose was trained under the illustrious artist, Asit Kumar Haldar (1890-1964) who was one of the more renowned art educators and fresco specialists of colonial India. He was principal at the artist colony of poet and Nobel-laureate Rabindranath Tagore in Santiniketan near Calcutta and subsequently at the Government Art College in Lucknow in the early 1900s. The ethos and vocabulary of Haldar and his association with the style of the Bengal School was deeply etched in the grammar of Bose's craft and aesthetics. At a young age of twenty, Bose embraced a teaching career in art in Delhi and there began a sojourn into an artist-educator's journey through colonial to postcolonial India. His sojourn brought him closer to the doors of colonialism through the friendship, support and patronage of Lord and Lady Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India in pre-independent India, which fueled his growth as an artist. So much so, that his paintings formed part of the late Mountbatten's private collection at Broadland House, Romsey in Hampshire in the United

Kingdom. Lady Mountbatten's patronage played an instrumental role in shaping Bose's place as an artist giving it exposure through exhibitions, acquisitions and commissions. Bose was appointed Curator of Paintings at Viceroy House (now known as Rashtrapati Bhavan or the Presidential Palace) in Delhi from 1945 to 1972, a position that he straddled through pre- and postcolonial India placing him at the heart of nationalism and independent India. Having exhibited worldwide including a commission by the Vatican to paint a mural in 1950, Bose was awarded India's highest cultural award, the Padma Shri in 1970 for his service to art and India.

Through his works one would instance an artist's narrative of the world he experienced, the culture that his art brings with it, and the interlocutions it could potentially provide the reader. The purpose of this essay is not to undertake a comprehensive study of his art—as art historians would do— but to locate his works within moments of history (where ideas of journeying, encounters with the unknown, hybridization, socio-political anxieties coalesce) and tease out identities and principles that are challenged, questioned and probed. The intent is to be purposive rather than comprehensive and the following section will briefly map key nexus points of Indian art history. This is to trace the influences on the art of Sukumar Bose.

Historical Setting

History asks us: what manner of cause are we? Are we uncompromising, absolute, strong, or will we show ourselves to be timeservers, who compromise, trim and yield?

—Salman Rushdie, *Satanic Verses* (1988)

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(Detail) **Soliloquy**, 1980s
Pencil Drawing, 9.8 x 7 in.
Private Collection

THAT CONTEMPORARY RECORDING of history is re-membered, visualized and legitimated in written form causes one to easily forget that history

has always had an omniscient presence in oral, aural and visual forms. The arts of India continue to celebrate these myriad possibilities of history while withstanding and acculturating multiple infusions from external cultures, peoples and their histories over the centuries. This mistakenly allows for many to think that India is a slow moving continent. But alas, it is the opposite. The acculturation is a slow but deeply engaging democratic process that deepens every drop of history's kindness and unkindness thereby bringing India and its people closer to their self-representation and meaning-making process.

History, through the visual arts, has served to catalogue events and is an important tool to remember the ancient and contemporary times; for example, colonial conquests involved the scrutiny of the socio-cultural domain of a particular society through ethnographic drawings of artists. I am reminded of the artists who followed Sir Francis Drake (1550-1596) in mapping customs, traditions and ways of living; *inter alia* mapping the world. Similarly, as the colonial adventures of the British East India Company broadened to encapsulate capitalist and foreign policy interests in the late 1700s, these interests led to the documentation of the experiences and encounters of thousands of expatriates living and working in South Asia. As Marika Sardar (2004) adds, "as they travelled through the country and encountered unusual flora and fauna, stunning ancient monuments, and exotic new people, they wanted to capture these images to send or take home. Whereas the modern tourist would rely on his camera for such a task, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travellers had to hire Indian painters to do the job. The works produced by these artists, undertaken in a European style and palette, are known collectively as 'Company' paintings." In addition, professional artists from Britain such as William Hodges and Thomas and William Daniell, trained in European landscape painting, illustrated their experiences and narrativized their visualization of cities, villages, temples, mosques, palaces

and more picturizing India for Europe (Mathur 2007, p.12). Sardar found that different Indian cities from Calcutta to Benares to Madras produced works that were "distinguishable by style" and found strong enthusiasm and patronage amongst colonial civil servants such as Lord Impey, the chief justice of the High Court from 1777 to 1783, the Marques Wellesley, who served as governor-general from 1798 to 1805 and Lord and Lady Clive who were stationed in Madras from 1798 to 1804. Just like the firm patronage of Lady Edwina Mountbatten of artist Bose, colonial patronage provided numerous Indian artists opportunities to partake in the visual arts business of exhibitions, acquisitions and commissions.

In the late 1800s, the British were instrumental in setting up educational institutions in India immediately after the English language was made the language of law courts and administration in 1835. Following the establishment of three universities in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras between 1954 and 1857, a series of arts schools were set up as part of its colonial enterprise to perpetuate education to its subjects. Vinayak Purohit (1988) in his seminal two-volume book, *Arts of Transitional India: Twentieth Century, 1905-1985* asserts that the intent of setting up arts schools was to expiate guilt of destroying Indian manufacturing and that they were modeled after Marlborough House. Purohit quotes Charles Trevelyan's 1853 comment:

> I would make the Marlborough House a model for a college of art. Art is taught there systematically. I would establish an institution at Calcutta on that model. There is a peculiar call upon us to give the natives of India all the advantage in the cultivation of the arts, which it is in our power to give, for in order to favour our own manufacturers imported into India and partly by levying a heavy duty upon Indian manufacturers imported into England, in addition to the natural manufacturing superiority of England, we have by these means swept

away great branches of manufacture and have caused great distress in India. Consequently I consider that we owe a great debt to India in this respect and that it is specially our duty to give our Indian fellow-subjects every possible aid in cultivating those branches of art that still remain to them. (Purohit 1988, pp. 603-31)

Purohit notes that three key objectives of starting arts schools—reviving industries, training professional craftsmen and improving public taste—saw the prompt establishment of public art schools in Madras (1854), Calcutta (1854), Bombay (1857) and Lahore (1878). The Madras School of Art, which was originally founded as a private arts school in 1850 and repurposed as the former, shared similar founding objectives with the Government School of Design in London which was established in 1837 and subsequently renamed Royal College of Art in 1896; "the former was founded to improve the taste of the native people as regards beauty of form and finish in the articles in daily use amongst them and the Madras school was started in recognition of the need for extending the knowledge of the arts and the principles of design among the people and to encourage the direct application of the arts to industry" (Purohit 1988, p. 639). This proliferation of art schools saw a tremendous flow of European styled art emerging with its ethnographic detailing and naturalistic representations providing an environment for active learning of art. Geeta Kapur observes that this emphasis on active learning through a "pedagogy for oil and easel painting based on life drawing" had a grave impact on the future of the development of art as this "formed the academic criteria for and against which subsequent movements in Indian art developed" (Kapur 1993, p. 29). While this proliferation was politically, historically and aesthetically problematic, it enabled a wellspring of Indian artists who were able to use it as a vehicle to give voice to their identities and self-representation, which was being suffocated by colonialism.

Amidst this confusing creative environment located in the harsh realities of colonialism, emerged Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) a prince from Travancore, Kerala. Self taught, he mastered the European tradition and turned it around to focus on painting indigenous subjects drawn from epic and mythical traditions such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana of India bringing "on par native Indian with Greek and Christian representations of its classical past" (Kapur 1993, p. 28). Renowned Indian art history scholar, Partha Mitter (2006) observes that the success of Varma's works was simply because "Indians were moved by the melodramatic and the sentimental, a predilection to be found in full measure in Varma. Almost all his compositions, apart from formal portraits, bore sentimental captions in the salon tradition…Varma was unrivalled in his strategy for re-creating a romantic past…" (Mitter 2006, pp. 169-70). Both Europeans and Indians alike consumed Varma's work quickly entrenching his aesthetic as being 'of Indian' into the everyday life of India. For the former, an up and coming bourgeoisie, his works represented the colour and texture of India and for the latter, he was producing a counter hegemonic system to the ground realities of that time. Varma started a lithographic press in Bombay in 1894, at his own expense, to print his alluring paintings in large numbers to make them accessible to a buying marketplace thereby facilitating the commercialization of Indian art. Mitter cites poet Rabindranath Tagore who says, "in my childhood, when Ravi Varma's age arrived in Bengal, reproductions of European paintings on the walls were promptly replaced with oleographs of his works" (Mitter 2006, p. 169). But Varma's style was not without its critics.

Parallel to the Madras School of Art, a vanguardism in art was playing itself out in Calcutta in reaction to the western modes of teaching and the proliferation of Varma's style of art, which was deemed to have emulated colonial models of western aesthetic. EB Havell an English art teacher and superintendent at the Calcutta School of Art together with

artist, Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951)—nephew of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore—resisted the western art education and encouraged the teaching of the Mughal style of paintings as being more true and responsive to Indian art and an Indian style of painting (Mitter 2007). If colonial discourse on art was a form of periphrasis to subjugate the subject, the Bengal School style—as it was collectively known—was set to stage a reconnaissance of this endeavour. This movement was deemed a "renaissance" (Kapur 1993, p. 30) contributing significantly to rising nationalism in India. Tagore in his resistance to western modalities to art, engaged with other forms of aesthetic developments in East Asia, namely China and Japan. This engagement lent itself to a growing aspiration for a pan-Asian model of art and increasingly an oriental aesthetic was emerging alongside Indian art aesthetics in works of art. The Bengal School mode of practice produced numerous artists who were served to found modern art in India. These include, in particular, Gaganendranath Tagore, Asit Kumar Haldar, MA Rahman Chughtai and Nandalal Bose. Their works highlighted India's complex relationship with tradition, colonialism, modernity and nationalism and types of answers that could be arrived at for a postcolony. But amidst this, in 1901, Rabindranath Tagore founded Santiniketan, an artist collective, centred on investing in Indian folk and traditional literary and artistic endeavours. This became an important site for artists to gather and hone their ideas about art, ideology and self-representation. Nandalal Bose (1883-1966), star student of Abanindranath Tagore, led the Kala Bhavan (art school) in the early 1920s taking the ideas of his teacher one step further by systematizing an art curriculum that drew from "oriental influences and included aesthetics and drawing techniques taught by visiting teachers from China and Japan" (Kapur 1993, p. 32) while eschewing western techniques. The outcome of such a curriculum is a signification that has had a far-reaching impact on the psyche of Indian society and its engagement with tradition. The curriculum provided a possible new aesthetic for Asia that can be

said to have a seedling in the art of Nandalal Bose. This new aesthetic embedded itself in the works of his students and their students but more so, contributed significantly to a cultural identity that was emerging as a response to colonialism and leading to independence. One of the most important artists to emerge in this milieu, though not part of the collective, was Jamini Roy (1887-1972). Regarded as the "father of folk renaissance" his works were considered the most "radical expression of local identity in opposition to the Pan-Indian historicism of the Bengal School" (Mitter 2007, p. 100). Though he did not agree with the ethos of the Bengal School, he found affinity in areas of cultural authenticity arising out of his own rural background. Partha Mitter who undertook one of the more comprehensive studies of Roy proclaims that his style radicalized the indigenous and the primitive found in Indian and colonial art through a formal pictorial language which exuded a stark monumentality to it and in so doing, sari-clad women, madonnas, village dances and domestic animals become iconic (Mitter 2007, p. 112). Mitter saw his works as a political act—an act to question the meaning of artistic integrity by aligning art to artisanship and so doing, embarking on a heroic search for an authentic Indian art—stark, austere and simple.

I want to conclude this section with a brief sojourn into the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group (1947). A critical response to the Bengal School's protocol of engagement with nationalism was the founding of PAG in 1947 by renowned and celebrated modern Indian artists such as Francis Newton Souza, Maqbool Fida Husain and Syed Haider Raza. These artists felt that the mere embrace of Indian vocabulary was limited and restrained art from moving forward. Rebecca Brown points out that many of the artists involved in the PAG were trained at Sir JJ School of Art which was established in the 1930s by the British to further the teaching of contemporary movements in European art from "colours of Henri Matisse, the cubism of Picasso and the symbolism of Paul Klee or

Joan Miró" (Brown 2009, pp. 12-13). Not to shy away from negotiating the paradox of modern India, they were determined to confront with the modern in keeping with the internationalism that a newly independent India was surrounded with. By forcefully engaging with European and Indian forms—from abstract expressionism to post-impressionism to cubism—the PAG heralded what art historians call Indian Modernism. But the artists of the PAG were not blind emulators for they were constantly rubbing the twin heads of socialist art and formalism inherent in western art thereby bringing a more personal and reflexive element to their works that lent to their identity and self-representation in a particular place, time and history. This definitive approach of the PAG had huge reverberative impact on the art of India thereafter. Their impact cannot be undermined as many of the key artists continue to influence the art market well into the twenty-first century.

Locating Bose

It is not the object of the story to convey a happening per se...rather it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hand.

—Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller* (1968)

THE WORK OF Sukumar Bose remains uncharted and trapped in the annals of history. In looking at discovering his work, the viewer's eye is invited to locate narratives through traces of texture, grammar, framing, composition and even title to link to the possible record of ideas. Bose travelled well across the history of his country. His works provide an ancient sensibility of a nomadic longing of sojourners who seek for a transcendental idea. But this sensibility is predicated on the development

of art in India as encapsulated by the works of his peers and generation of artist-ideologues such as Abanindranath Tagore, Asit Kumar Haldar and Nandalal Bose.

His landscape paintings, village life paintings and portraits reveal a strong adherence to realism, human connection and place within nature's ecosystem revealing a strong rooted pedigree in the colonial art educational system. Yet these works breathe an aesthetic allegiance to the Bengal School: a testament to his teacher's works. An incisive study of his work undertaken by art historian Nuzhat Kamzi, in this book, foregrounds the place of the techniques that Bose utilizes to develop, characterize and romanticize the world he saw. For example, in a portrait of an indigenous Santhal tribeswoman from rural Bengal, an ethereal feel (reminiscent of the Ajanta-Ellora cave paintings, which was of research interest to Haldar) of tradition fast losing its edge to colonialism—and

Above
(Detail) **Landscape**, 1980
Watercolour, 29 x 22 in.
Private Collection

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the modernity it brought along with it—finds a place in Bose's portrait through a light opacity that signifies the muted realism of the land. Signs that are quickly identifiable as tribal are interjected with alienation. Yet there is a 'primitive' simplicity being met at the edge of modernity. Rabindranath Tagore led this primitive simplicity against urbanization and rural Bengal and its inhabitants were admired for their innocence removed from colonialism. This led the way for a new wave of ruralism in Indian art against the gaze of European aesthetics (Mitter 2007, pp. 29-33). Bose's work lodges itself in this wave. There is much silence in this portrait; perhaps a silencing experienced between the transnational exchange between tradition and modern, urban and suburban, life and death: a slow bleeding of selfhood. But therein lies a story, a narrative.

Scholars (Dehejia 1998; Brown 2009) agree that the visual storytelling is a distinctive feature of Indian art. Though not exclusive to India, narrative structures have aided the perpetuation and critique of epics, historical events, autobiographies, mythologies (Hindu, Christian and Buddhist), personages, etc. through the works of artists from Raja Ravi Varma, Jamini Roy, MF Husain to modern-day storytellers such as Atul Dodiya and Gigi Scaria. In Asia, this feature aligns itself with the more representative forms of social realist art found in Southeast Asia. However, narrative forms in art are sites of contention, socio-political awareness and recording of history and evidenced through interweaved idioms drawn from indigenous references. Visual storytelling in India is further fuelled by Sanskrit aesthetic theory of *Rasa* as developed through the ancient times by sage Bharata whose treatise on the performing arts, the *Natya Sastra* (written between 200 BC and 200 AD) outlines the nine *rasas* or human emotions each attributed with a colour (aura) and a hindu deity. The nine guiding *rasas* are: *Sringaram* (Love/white/Vishnu); *Hasyam* (Laughter/white/Pramata), *Raudrum* (Fury/red/Rudra); *Karunyam* (Compassion/grey/Yama); *Bibhatsam* (Disgust/

blue/Shiva); *Bhayanakam* (Fear/black/Kala); *Viram* (Heroic/yellowish/ Indra); *Adbhutam* (Wonderment/yellow/Brahma); and *Santam* (Peace/ perpetual white/Vishnu) (Goswamy 1996; Vatsyayan 1996). These principles of *rasa* are further subdivided into *bhavas* or expressions to give further texture to the microscopic twitches of human emotions. While this precise codification of human expressions and behaviour can be formalistic, hermetic and restraining, its pervasive centrality in everyday Indian life including religion, social life, popular culture and the arts especially cinematic arts cannot be undermined. Its place in visual and colour studies are equally and, more importantly, critical to any visual narrativity.

Narrative structures expressed in a nuanced play of magic realism are an integral part of Bose's aesthetic. Magic realism, a device of creating a transcendental quality to fictional imagining, often conjures the funny and fearful; melodramatic and real; and the productive and counterproductive to reveal that which is there – yet unknown, unspoken. It is at once a play (*lila*), an illusory moment (*maya*) and a discovery giving voice to that which is not represented. Popularized by postcolonial novelists such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie, magic realism has been a useful devise for re-claiming cultural representation from colonial representation worldwide from South America, West Indies, Africa, and India to Australia. Its potency is in its ability to unravel the weaves of social, political and cultural structures and knowledges that are often taken for granted and assumed as appropriate. Postcolonial theorist Stephen Slemon writes that "in the language of narration in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a fictional world from the other" and the "real social relations of post-colonial cultures appear, through the mediation of the text's language of narration, in the post-colonial magic realist work" (Slemon 1988, pp. 11-12). But more important the

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play with binary logic and triptych logic of the physical-metaphysical-self is constantly at hand but never quite the same: thereby magic realist texts "tend to display a preoccupation with images of borders and centres, and to work towards destabilizing their fixity" (ibid). Magic realism, in Bose's art, plays on multiple planes of axis conjuring distinctive worlds in paradoxes that allows for the conception of alternative realities and perceptions. Magic realism's usefulness often extends into visual language facilitating the artist to establish a more reflexive reality than conventional illustration. This also allows for a piece of art to not invoke the fantastical as a trope but rather maintain integrity to the narrative. In this regard, Bose's Christian nativity paintings, Radha-Krishna and Buddha paintings (see chapter by Sinniah) function as allegories of iconic Indian imaginary of an authentic tradition located with its indigenous mythology of love, piety and spirituality.

His grand masterpiece, *Sir Thomas Roe at the Mughal Court of Emperor Jahangir* (watercolour, 1976) stands out in this realm. Nuzhat Kazmi, in the ensuing essay, eloquently studies the masterpiece which had taken ten years to complete. Started in India, it was completed in Singapore where Bose shuttled to spend time with his son and grandchildren for about fifteen years throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Invoking the seventeeth century Mughal emperor Jahangir's engagement with the western world of Sir Thomas Roe, the work is a paradox. A paradox of painterly ingenuity of making watercolour seemingly look like oil with a quizzable curiosity as to Bose's obsession to paint a historically specific piece of narrative in the 1970s. Drawing strong resonance to realist stylisation and Mughal miniature paintings, this paradox is reflexive of Bose's own culmination of his colonial, postcolonial and diasporic condition of movement in and out of space and time. Bose's re-visualization of the primal scene (Roe meeting Jahangir) produces a double meaning where the native/foreign, aristocract/merchantilist and subject/object binaries are teasingly

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Portrait of a Tribal Woman (Muna Bai), 1936
Oil , 21 x 25 in.
Private Collection

Above
(Detail) **Nativity I,** 1940
Watercolour
Collection of Modern School, New Delhi, India

played out and one cannot but extrapolate Bose's own transient sojourn (like Roe's) into a new land, space and culture—an inner reflection of self-representation through the lens of the past—and the need to study, objectify and contextualize the new experience. The new experience for Bose is Southeast Asia – a place that has an equally fecund history of colonial and postcolonial interventions. A brief description of the context of Southeast Asia and, in particular, art in Singapore is necessary as it informs and shapes the later works of Bose.

Singapore Sojourn

SUKUMAR BOSE ARRIVED in Singapore in the early 1970s. Motivated to spend time with his children and grandchildren upon retirement, he quickly embraced the multicultural values of a newly birthed modern society; a condition that he was not entirely unfamiliar with having straddled colonial and postcolonial India. He painted extensively while

intimating himself with the island of Singapore through conversations with artists, painting sessions at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and walking through the streets of Singapore. He travelled Southeast Asia visiting particularly Malaysia, which became a rich source of inspiration. He mounted two exhibitions in Singapore in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is useful to contextualize Bose's newfound environment, which while, on one hand, will explain the ease with which he was able to adapt in a foreign land and on the other hand, identify motivations that gave rise to his deeply rich abstract and conceptual works.

Southeast Asia, a composite of ten countries with diverse cultural and linguistic histories, is not alien to India for it has been a site of economic conjugation since 100 AD when Indian traders and fleeing Indian royalties from the eastern coast of India (Hsu 1999) alongside Chinese traders and travellers began their journeys engraving their marks on the Southeast Asian cultures. The Sanskrit language began to impress its influence on the linguistic make up of the region while the more pronounced influence came from the Indianized Javanese Kingdom of Majapahit in the early fourteenth century. The fifteenth century Southeast Asia is watermarked by the spread of Islam with the meteoric rise of the Melaka Sultanate on the west coast of Malaya. Intertwining political and economic realities saw the cultural landscape shifting from one of Hinduism to Islam and has remained so till today. The following centuries saw the increased European (Portuguese, Dutch, French and British) visitation and colonization become a major business nexus between India and China.

Like India's colonial enterprise of introducing art schools, Southeast Asia too saw its fair share of such establishments in each of the countries, some starting as early as the nineteenth century (Philippines and Thailand) whilst others much later in the early and middle of the twentieth

century (Malaysia and Singapore). But the common thread was a culturally specific and considered relationship to the embrace of western art form. Art historian John Clark observes that, "in Southeast Asia, realistic European oil painting was not connected with the strong pictorial discourse of China and Japan, each of which had developed parallel art theoretical or poetic criticism" (Clark cited in Chou-Shulin 2010, p. 248). But any attempt at articulating a collective aesthetic for Southeast Asia—premised on geography, language and history—is challenging and to say the least a futile exercise. The influence of more than three centuries of colonial presence could forgive all who "surmise that Southeast Asian artists are, in a sense, more thoroughly (classically) westernized" (Chou-Shulin 2010, p. 253). From the Philippines to Singapore one would find the strong language of western realism being pervasive. But with the evolution into postcolonialism, political upheavals and industrialization, this language of realism has undergone a phantasmatic transformation to being an Asian stylistic form.

In Singapore, art historian TK Sabapathy dates the possibility for a modern art history at 1937 when a few China-born artists and enthusiasts set up the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) – the first art institution in British Singapore/Malaya. NAFA was a hothouse for many artists: particularly, the affectionately known Nanyang pioneer artists – Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi, Liu Kang and Georgette Chen. The parallel to the modern Indian art movement cannot be closer especially with that of the Progressive Art Group in Bombay. Drawing from the Chinese painting and School of Paris traditions, these artists in Singapore were adept in exercising styles from both these traditions. They were very much part of the regenerative art movement of the 1920s and 1930s in China, particularly in major cities like Shanghai and Guangdong where artists aggressively sought to redefine Chinese art from the clutches of traditional art (Sabapathy 1987). According to Michael Sullivan, "the

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(Detail) **Creation Series**, c. 1970s
Oil on Canvas, 92 x 123 in.
Private Collection

Chinese artists were more at home with Western art than their predecessors; they had greater skill at using it, and were able to adapt more freely to their own expressive needs…it seemed that a new Chinese painting, native in spirit, contemporary in theme, borrowing techniques freely from East and West, was about to take root…" (Sullivan quoted in Sabapathy 1987).

As with the Bengal School and Progressive Art Group, tradition, nativity and modernity framed the works of the Nanyang artists who were preoccupied with the newfound land. A trip to the Indonesian island of Bali in 1952 by some of the Nanyang artists became a turning point for them as the full realization of the importance of self-representation through the landscape of Southeast Asia was integral to surviving and forming a cultural identity. The seamless innocence of integrating rural life, ritual and art in this staunchly Hindu island set the tone for the future of modern art of Southeast Asia. That Southeast Asia is a confluence of cultures and identities prepares it to be a battleground for aesthetic traditions from the west, China, India and the intra-Southeast Asia (Chou-Shulin 2010). I have argued elsewhere (Purushothaman 2004) that despite the heterogeneity in styles, themes and experiences, the Bali travel encapsulates an orientalist ritual of encountering "the journey, the history, the fable, the stereotype, the polemical confrontation. These are the lens through which the Orient is experienced and they shape the language, perception, and form of the encounter between East and West" (Said 1979, p. 58). The Nanyang artists foregrounded a hermeneutic cultural inscription of Southeast Asia and Singapore which cannot be ignored (Kwok 1996) as there was a want to capture the essential physical moment (ritual, landscape and hope in a new land) as opposed to the study of subjectivity. But if western art education was a civilizing force of the colonial subject, then just as the Progressive Art Group, the Nanyang artists pose a conundrum where what their art reveals, contextualizes and historicizes is privileged over what it conceals, decontextualizes and erases. As a narrative structure,

social realism in art presents itself as natural rather than cultural – an unencumbered product of, or reflection of an innocent Southeast Asian reality. It masks the discursive power of the cultural context.

In the 1970s a group of artists in Singapore trained in the West and known as the 'second generation' artists (Anthony Poon, Thomas Yeo, Teo Eng Seng, Ng Eng Teng, Goh Beng Kwan) were preoccupied with notions of self, identity and place, which was particularly significant in a time of nation building. The formal breakdown between two-dimensional and three-dimensional works coupled with a greater degree of conceptual abstraction marked the works of these artists. Through abstraction and conceptualisms, these artists began a cultural critique of an overtly industrializing Singapore. Equally important in this time was the adventurous developments in the Chinese ink tradition by artists such as Tan Swie Hian, Tan Oe Pang and Henri Chen who rooted to create syncretized art derived from the marriage between traditional practices and western abstract expression. This became emblematic of a Southeast Asia searching for fresh avenues to the unnatural process of multiculturalism – of bringing people together within a socio-political framework. Invoking Asian, especially Chinese, traditions (akin to the Bengal School's attempt at a pan-Asian stylistic) through subject matters such as landscape, animate beings in nature e.g. birds and flora and fauna; materials such as rice paper and scrolls; and techniques of design, these artists, created a new art for Singapore and Southeast Asia; an art that was not afraid to express and acknowledge the polyvocality of the region and the tribulations of a rapidly urbanizing Southeast Asia. As Constance Sheares (1989) remarks, these did not have a "particular style but a new aesthetic attitude and new way of perceiving their world. This does not mean that they have rejected their links with their past. Deliberately or unconsciously, they continue to draw inspiration from centuries of cultural tradition."

Above
(Detail) **Creation Series**, c. 1970s
Oil on Canvas, 92 x 123 in.
Private Collection

Facing Page
(Detail) **Reflection (Creation Series)**, c. 1970s
Oil on Canvas, 93 x 123 in.
Private Collection

Bose's art took a creative turn in Singapore. His works started to move toward nature and the abstract, both thematics very much in the air of Southeast Asia as earlier propounded. Lithe, fluid and dreamlike colours present themselves in shapes, forms and symbols while lines, textures and composition play the narratival role in expanding on the imaginary as an aesthetic form. This is in keeping with the resistive movements in art, where artists find a turn in their work that allows them to break free from the prison house of traditional artistic language. Rhythmic flow between cultures was thematically evident in the later works and they drew a strong resonance to Chinese ink painting. His acquaintance with the celebrated Singaporean Chinese ink and calligraphic artist, Tan Swie Hian and the exposure to the Nanyang group of artists furthered his exploration of the aesthetic of Chinese ink. This seemed to have unlocked a moment of

history that resided deep in his subconscious: the development of a pan-Asian ideology and aesthetic that the Bengal School artists were seeking to inculcate. His sojourn into Southeast Asia brought him closer to this realisatory possibility as his canvases remain a vigil to the Indian hope.

Conclusion

IN A COMPLEX globalized world, the nature of life and lived experience, contemporary and tradition, original and authentic are deliberated much more commonly through everyday life, academic scholarship and business. The re-invention of the nomadic tribes into modern-day tourists and the exploratory seafarers into modern-day economic expatriates have broken down borders and boundaries, imagined or real, beyond the concept of a nation, a country. It is a paradox that one is identified ethnically but the world of commerce identifies the employee. Despite a nose-bled world post 9/11 terrorism causing recoil of all things global, today it is difficult to categorize the nature of the local and the international as many cultures crisscross formulating new identities and paradigms that now operate on the level of the transnational. In this site of the transnational, binaries and categories flounder for a place in the imaginary to assert identity formation around principles of what some might deem as Habermasian, inclusivity, stability, clarity, rationality instead of a principle predicated on bonding built through heterogeneous association and self-discovery.

The world that we experienced in the late twentieth century and continue to experience is one of flows—drawing from Manuel Castells' theory (1996)—creative, economic and imaginative facilitated by technology, travel and personal preferences. This is unlike the colonial endeavour, which was motivated by discovery, conquests and commerce. Interpersonal networks organized around the family, profession or leisure continue to be key driving flows for contemporary societies. Unlike

Castells, Hardt and Negri (2001) saw the emergence of hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies and plural exchanges in a transnational space where power structures were deterritorialized. I am cautious not to over extend Hardt and Negri's thesis beyond the scope of its contribution to Castell's theory but acknowledge that contemporary society is primarily driven by foreign policy and commerce much more than the ability of technology to connect people. But the idea of deterritorialized structures cannot be more evident than in activities such as flash mobs taking place in cities around the world energized by the power of technology and networks.

But within this system, how does contemporary history find its place? What then happens to art and its faithful attendant beauty? Indeed, this is an odd question for a book that documents the life of an artist, his works and legacy and privileges context and historicity over the beauty of the art. It is convenient to delineate, distinguish or partisan the two and give pride of place not to history but to provenance. But this rumination through the selectivity of Indian art historiography and placing Bose within its topography is to appreciate the difficulty in dividing the aesthetic and the historical; the abstract and real; and the everyday and mythical in Asian societies that continue to desire an 'authentic' pluralized history of art outside of colonialism. It is this desire that drives the concept of nationalism to embrace plurality (Spivak 2008) and the imagined (Anderson 1983) thereby providing the scope for cultural discourse and self-representation. Bose's work and legacy add to the texture of this desire.

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