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**TAKE**  
ON INDIA

# Bengal

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11	Editor's Note – Bhavna Kakar
13	Guest Editor's Note – Ina Puri
<hr/>	
<i>Take / Bengal</i>	
014	Title: <i>The Politics of Polarisation: Art in Bengal</i> Author: Samit Das
022	Title: <i>India and the Modern in the Art of Pre-Independent Bengal</i> Author: R. Siva Kumar
028	Artist: Jamini Roy Author: Sona Datta
030	Artist: Ramkinkar Baij Author: Anshuman Dasgupta
032	Title: <i>Kolkata: The Fertile Land of Artists and Educators</i> Author: Argha Kamal Ganguly
038	Artist: Abanindranath Tagore Author: Sanjoy Kumar Mallik
040	Artist: Abanindranath Tagore Author: Premjish Achari
042	Artist: Nandalal Bose Author: Madhuvanti Ghose
044	Artist: Nikhil Biswas Author: Nishad Avari
046	Artist: Somnath Hore Author: Indrapramit Roy
048	Title: <i>Real within the Real - Women Artists in Bengal till the 1970s</i> Author: Dr Nandini Ghosh
056	Title: <i>In Search of the People</i> Author: Adip Dutta
062	Title: <i>The City and its Architecture</i> Author: Jawhar Sircar
068	Title: <i>Bengali Drama</i> Author: Ananda Lal
072	Title: <i>Though Not by Roots Alone</i> Author: Manasij Majumder
076	Artist: Bikash Bhattacharjee Author: Deepanjana Klein
078	Artist: Murtaja Baseer Author: Diana Campbell Betancourt
080	Title: <i>A Historical Overview of Printmaking in Bengal (1900-2000)</i> Author: Dr Nirmalendu Das
086	Artist: Ganesh Pyne Author: Deepanjana Klein
088	Title: <i>Reimagining Ganesh Pyne: The Reclusive Artist</i> Author: Veena Bhargava
092	Artist: Sri Gauri Chitrakar Author: Madhuvanti Ghose
094	Title: <i>Lens on Craft</i> Author: Kunal Basu
098	Title: <i>Food in Bengal Art</i> Author: Nilanjana S. Roy
102	Title: <i>Mrinalini Mukherjee Animate Nature</i> Author: Emilia Terracciano
106	Title: <i>Earth as Haven: Under the Canopy of Love</i> Author: Roobina Karode
110	Artist: Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray Author: Debraj Goswami
112	Title: <i>Here to Stay</i> Author: Shahidul Alam

116	Title: <i>Photo Essay</i> Author: Ronny Sen
120	Title: <i>Photo Essay</i> Author: Raghu Rai
124	Title: <i>City in Suture: Thinking Kolkata with Bapi Das</i> Author: Diksha Gupta and Samira Bose
128	Title: <i>Family Tales: Conversation with Chittrovanu Mazumdar</i> Author: Kumal Ray
132	Title: <i>The Collector's Narrative</i> Author: Shobhaa De interviews Dilip De
<hr/>	
<i>Report</i>	
136	Title: <i>Land of Exhile</i> Author: Julian Spalding
138	Title: <i>Outside Art</i> Author: Ajai Vilasini
140	Title: <i>Exploring the Archive: A Vignette</i> Author: Najrin Islam
146	Title: <i>Conversation with Tarana Sawhney</i> Author: Sitara Chowla
152	Title: <i>Kolkata Centre for Creativity</i> Author: Paroma Maity
<hr/>	
<i>Book Review</i>	
154	Title: <i>Jangarh Singh Shyam: A Conjuror's Archive</i> Author: Shilpa R.
155	Title: <i>Jitish Kallat</i> Author: TAKE Team
<hr/>	
<i>International Review</i>	
157	Title: <i>Staging Possibility: Reading India at the 58th Venice Biennale</i> Author: Annalisa Mansukhani
160	Title: <i>Recent Works by Prabhavathi Meppayil</i> Author: Rahul Kumar
<hr/>	
<i>Review</i>	
162	Title: <i>Connecting Threads: Textiles in Contemporary Practice</i> Author: Monisha Ahmed
163	Title: <i>Through the Eyes of an Intimate Outsider</i> Author: Oindrilla Maity Surai
164	Title: <i>In a Bizarre World: Adhut Lok</i> Author: Oindrilla Maity Surai
166	Title: <i>Prabhakar Barwe-A Forgotten Master</i> Author: Kunal Ray
167	Title: <i>Art on a Two-Way Street: 4th Kochi-Muziris Biennale</i> Author: Dilpreet Bhullar
168	Title: <i>Reflected Imaginaries: Chennai Photo Biennale, 2019</i> Author: Suryanandini Narain
<hr/>	
<i>Graphic Strip</i>	
170	Title: <i>Trollspecter</i> Author: Sarnath Banerjee
176	Title: <i>Emerald Apsara - The Adventures of Professor P.R. Mazoomder</i> Author: Orjit Sen
<hr/>	
<i>TAKE Pick</i>	
144	Title: <i>Launch of Archive as Medium - Exploring the Performative Body</i> Author: TAKE Team
172	Title: <i>Launch of TAKE Fashion</i> Author: TAKE Team



## Bengal

Shobhaa De interviews Dilip De

# THE COLLECTOR'S NARRATIVE

• Dilip De with his collection. 175 year old Bengali *Patachitra* and Jamini Roy's artworks in the background.

## Bengal

**Shobhaa De (SD):** What does the Bengal School mean to you?

**Dilip De (DD):** I have a strong visceral connection to the Bengal School. Let's say, I am emotionally invested in it, given my background and upbringing. Any artwork representative of the Bengal School continues to inspire me. It has had a seminal influence on me, as a collector and lover of art. Art has always flourished in Bengal and India but it was during the British Raj that local artists were influenced by leading European and English painters who visited Calcutta for commission and patronage. As was the practice, many Bengali artists worked as apprentices in their studios. Subsequently, paintings by local artists were labelled as Company Period Art as well as Dutch Paintings.

A new group of nationalist artists under the stewardship of Abanindranath Tagore towards the third quarter of the nineteenth century in Calcutta and Santiniketan began a new movement of art, which spread throughout India. This movement pioneered by Abanindranath Tagore came to be known as Contextual Modern Art and was popularly called the Bengal School of Art, receiving the support of the British Government. It continues to hold its own till today, with better

awareness and a growing list of international connoisseurs.

**SD:** What attracts you to the Bengal School?

**DD:** As a Bengali born in a family of art connoisseurs, I grew up with art and beautiful objects around me. My maternal grandfather, D.C. Ghose was a founder — member of the Calcutta Fine Art Academy in 1930. Much later, I came in close contact with artists in Calcutta whose works made an impression on me for their individualistic quality and brilliance of paintings. I remember visiting the reclusive Ganesh Pyne at his home and discussing his work over *chai* and *sandesh*. Bikash Bhattacharya was a close friend who has stayed at our homes in Mumbai and Alibaug, and I have several commissioned works by him, including a portrait of my mother.

In my school, I was taught art and, subsequently, one of my water colours was exhibited at the Indian Museum in Calcutta.

**SD:** How different is the Bengal School from other schools of art?

**DD:** It is very distinctive! That's what makes it so special. It's also important to know that Calcutta (now Kolkata) was the capital of British India for a long period. During this period, many leading British and European

artists visited Calcutta looking for patronage from the then British Rulers and rich Indian art patrons and avid collectors.

Ernest Havell, a teacher at the Calcutta Art School, encouraged the Bengal School of Art movement. He encouraged students to understand Mughal Art, which was produced at the time the Mughal Empire was at his zenith in India, between 1526 and 1857. Havell encouraged Abanindranath Tagore to spearhead a nationalist and modern art movement that celebrated spiritual and artistic Indian traditions. The Bengal School not only incorporated western elements but borrowed from Chinese and Japanese art techniques as well. The Bengal School has a specific character and represents a powerful movement, making it unique.

**SD:** When and how did you start collecting work representative of the Bengal School?

**DD:** I started collecting



Dilip De with the Constitution of India illustrated by Nandalal Bose.



Nandalal Bose from Dilip De's collection.

art early on in life and it wasn't confined to paintings alone. I have a fairly good collection of Bengali multi-metal (*dhaatu*) statues and sculptures, terra cotta and wood artworks and old textiles with exquisite *kantha*.

But my prized possession is an original copy of the Indian Constitution. Nandalal Bose illuminated the original document of the Indian Constitution of India; each page is beautifully illustrated by him and his students.

**SD:** Do you think the Bengal School is under/overrated in the art bazaar?

**DD:** It appears that Bengal artists are facing creativity blocks and are struggling to produce more saleable works, according to art dealers, that is! I think this is a temporary creative drought and to overcome this issue local artists must find someone like Abanindranath Tagore to kick-start a more aggressive and robust art movement in Calcutta. I am sure this fallow phase will pass too. The art bazaar is fickle. Tastes change. But eventually great art holds its own and commands the price it deserves. The Bengal School will always have its loyal band of admirers.

**SD:** Which is the work in your personal collection that best represents the Bengal School?



Abanindranath Tagore from Dilip De's collection.

**DD:** My collection has been systematic and representative. I am fortunate to own works of Abanindranath Tagore, Rabinindranath Tagore, G.N. Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij, Jamini Roy, Ganesh Pyne, Bikash Bhattacharjee, Shyamal Dutta Ray, Shakti Burman, Ganesh Haloi and many others. Rabinindranath's self portrait and the original copy of the Constitution of India take pride of place in my collection of the Bengal School.

I greatly appreciate Kalighat *pat* paintings, which have seen a huge revival in recent times. I have a modest collection. This particular tradition goes back over 200 years. The *pats* illustrate daily stories of life, and it is interesting to note that they used to be sold for one anna per piece in and around the Kali temple back then.

**SD:** How does the Bengal School compare with the Baroda School?

**DD:** It is hard to draw comparisons. Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III, the ruler of Baroda, a visionary, invited Raja Ravi Varma to his princely state and commissioned portraits of the Maharaja and several other canvases. The ruler established the museum at the Baroda College, which included the Faculty of Fine Arts. In 1956, the artists from Baroda known as the Baroda Group

(1956), which included N.S. Bendre, Jyoti Bhatt, Shanti Dave, Haku Shah and K.G. Subramanyan, held their first exhibition in Bombay in 1957. Other established artists such as Laxma Goud, Nasreen Mohammadi, Sankho Chaudhari, etc., have been collectors too. Notably many of them migrated to Baroda from Bengal and thus Contextual Modern Art flourished there.

Records show that Contextual Modern Indian Art was born in Calcutta and Santiniketan and later spread to western India. K.G. Subramanyan, who learnt art at Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan in 1944 along with other prominent artists from Santiniketan, moved to Baroda as a new art destination with good facilities.

**SD:** Why is there no cohesive Bombay or Delhi School?

**DD:** Bombay is the financial capital and Delhi is the political capital of India. I may not be wrong in describing both these cities as major art bazaars of India. Without the support of collectors, art auction houses and art dealers, art cannot flourish and both cities are playing that role successfully to promote art. But no specific school has emerged from these two centres of art. There is, of course, the Progressive Group of Artists (PAG 1947) from Bombay —



Dilip De with Shobha De.

Francis Newton Souza, M.F. Husain, S.H. Raza, Tyeb Mehta, Akbar Padamsee, K.H. Ara and others. As there is the Baroda Group. Both have created a strong niche in the art world. But it is more like an informal group of individual painters rather than a recognisable school of art.

**SD:** Would you recommend the Bengal School to investors? How has it done commercially in the highly competitive art market, in India and overseas?

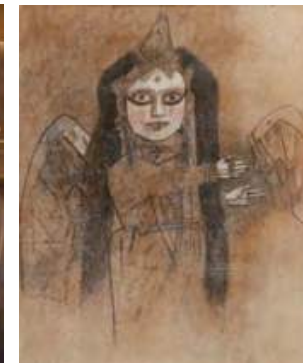
**DD:** As a keen supporter of the Bengal School, of course I would encourage patrons to invest in it. Unfortunately, leading art patrons live outside Bengal and this is the principal reason for lack of support to local artists. It appears that residents of Bengal are not supporting or collecting art any longer. It's a pure demand and supply situation.

Successful Bengali artists, after learning the craft, have migrated to market-friendly locations. It's a loss for Bengal! There is no other school of art, unfortunately. The Bengal School of Art is the original and the only one in India.

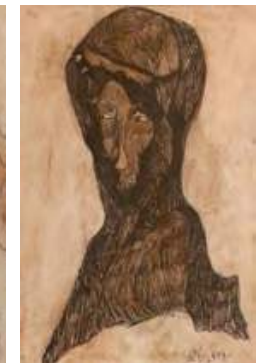
All images are courtesy of Dilip De.



Bikash Bhattacharjee, Portrait of Purnima De. Dilip De's collection.



Ganesh Pyne from Dilip De's collection.



Rabinindranath Tagore, Portrait. Dilip De's collection.