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Arts of Contradiction: Gaganendranath Tagore and the Caricatural Aesthetic of Colonial India

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Histories of colonial caricatures and modern art in India converge in the brief yet dense oeuvre of Gaganendranath Tagore, the modernist painter from early-twentieth-century Calcutta. Reading Gaganendranath's cartoons between 1917 and 1921 in dialogue with their lineages, peers, and potential, this article explores caricature as a critical aesthetic in the colony. Capturing tensions of participation and denial, desire and derision, caricature provided polemical tools for visualizing resistance in the colony. Under Gaganendranath Tagore, the genre was transformed into an aesthetic of rupture, bringing to visual art hitherto unexplored vocabularies of critique and expressionism. His cartoons reveal corporeal mechanisms at work that fused figuration with rhetoric, a satirical eye with modernist form, and politics with play. On one hand, this disturbed the idealistic 'Indian-style' paintings of the Bengal School, of which Gaganendranath himself was a key patron, and prompted on the other, critical possibilities within artistic realism as a late-colonial critical idiom, beyond its current academic naturalist structures. This play of and with contradictions, while being intrinsic to caricature, is Gaganendranath's modernist intervention into contemporary consensus and conventions - social, political, or cultural.

Keywords: caricature; Gaganendranath Tagore; modern art; India; resistance; stereotypes; colonialism; nationalism

On the cover page of his second album of cartoons, Adhbut Lok – Realm of the Absurd (1917), Gaganendranath Tagore (1867–1938) – painter, cartoonist, and one of the earliest modernist artists in India, shows a fellow Bengali trampling his reflection in a fit of furious rage. As the mirror crushes beneath him, his dark shadow looms large, engulfing as miasma the entire pictorial space. Gaganendranath titled the image, Aparadhi Chhyaya, The Offending Shadow (Figure 1), and predicated it with two quotations, the first from Mark Twain: 'Instead of feeling complimented when we are called an ass, we are left in doubt', and the second from his uncle, the poet Rabindranath Tagore: 'To be foolish is human. To laugh at it is more so.'1 Gaganendranath was, in all probability, humouring the displeasure caused by his first cartoon-album, Birup Bajra (translated variously as Wry Thunderbolts, Play of Opposites) published earlier in 1917.2 Yet, the image suggests more than a jocular snub of his agitated audience. The artist creates here, a conjunction of reflection, recognition, and rage, suggesting multiple ruptures. As the mirror splinters into chromatic shards of black and white around the agitated figure at the core of the image, fragmentations of form and subject intertwine.

Such intertwinnements – of forms and subjects, laughter and wrath – are caricature's craft. 'Caricature is a double thing', Charles Baudelaire had argued, 'it is both drawing and an idea – the drawing violent, the idea caustic and veiled'.3 Caricature is, as Mikhail Bakhtin noted, 'cognitive and ethical reorganisation of reality', both socially-rooted and culturally-coded.4 As a figurative mechanism, it is also a complex formal intervention. Comic physiognomy adds material power to ideas and possibilities of visualizing conflict, and the body-as-caricature becomes the corporeal site for affects of the political. In Gaganendranath Tagore, these intertwinnements of picture and polemic invoke multiple lineages that go back to the consolidation of colonial society in nineteenth-century Calcutta: in cultures of satire, self-irony, and political cartooning, which accompanied growth of anti-colonial politics and cultural nationalism, as well as in articulations of modernity in early-twentieth-century visual art. In Gaganendranath’s cartoons, these lineages converge in curious configurations of form, politics, and play. He began cartooning through whimsical sketches of the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of friends, family, visitors, at times street scenes or courtrooms.5 Between 1915 and 1921, he published three cartoon albums, and numerous cartoons,6 in a feverish spell of drawing, colouring, and printing on the same day, using his special purchase of a lithographic hand press.7 Nestled between his more noted watercolour landscapes and ink-sketches of the 1910s and the Cubist

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works of the 1920s, Gaganendranath’s cartoons are often relegated to an aristocrat’s fancy. While whim was indeed characteristic of his new ‘hobby’, even as interlude, his cartoons are critical, both to locate him within and vis-à-vis his contemporaries, as well as to delineate caricature’s dialogues with late-colonial modernism in India.

Both cartooning and modern art had punctuated beginnings in mid-nineteenth-century Calcutta, and continued in parallel and occasionally intersecting trajectories. While ‘high art’ patronized by the Bengal School of painting increasingly invoked nationalist commitment to cultural revivalism, caricature mirrored, tempered, and attacked social transformation in the colonial city. In lampoon, jest, parody, and satire, caricature triggered laughter and dismay, derision, and subversion. Caricature was urban, public, and political; by the 1870s, it had cut across genres of literature, popular prints, book illustrations, festive pantomimes, and pictorial journalism. Yet while the occasional artist from the newly established colonial art school dabbled in cartooning, its scopes remained restricted to ‘popular’ or strictly illustrative, didactic uses. Even as nationalist politics forged its own visual cultures of resistance, caricature failed to enter the aesthetic imagination of ‘high art’.

This article studies intersections of visual satire with modern art in the colony through Gaganendranath Tagore’s unique play with imagination and invective in his cartoons. Located at the heart of the Bengal School in the Jorasanko household of the Tagores, steeped in aesthetic revivalism patronized by his brother, the artist Abanindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore more sharply than his peers and predecessors – artists and/or cartoonists – activates a shared space of aesthetics and irony through his use of caricature. His whimsical trails of shifting artistic styles that baffled his contemporaries, and places him often at the fault-lines of Indian modernism, are cues into his artistic being – a caricatural subjectivity that both participated in and subverted the aesthetic norms of his times. While catching the drift of Bengal School’s misty Far Eastern styles and mythological subjects in his own works, Gaganendranath Tagore juxtaposed them with his sharp interlude of expressionistic caricatures – a hitherto unseen critical realism in art, the explosion of which in the 1940s, in the wake of war, famine, and genocide, he did not live to see.

Humour in the colony: laughter and lament

In the first volume of one of the earliest Bengali cartoon journals, Basantak (1874–75), the protagonist Basantak explains to his wife Basantika, why he had to marry twice in a month before marrying her: his first wife, named Chirahashini – ‘the ever smiling one’, had died out of endless laughter; his second wife, Katubhashini – ‘the foul mouthed one’, left him when her ill words turned people against Basantak; in Basantika, he had finally found the eternal flow of satire and wit, an ideal mélange of humour and critique free from personal assaults. This opening conjugal dialogue is a rhetorical staging of the ethics of pictorial humour that a magazine like Basantak claimed to stand for, its distinctly vernacular idiom a tool in forging an active public political identity of laughter. A similar ethic was professed by Basantak’s English peer in Calcutta in The Indian Charivari, when its editor, Sir Percy Wyndham announced in its first volume in 1872, the magazine’s playful spirit of ‘shooting folly as it flies, nothing extending, nor setting down ought in malice’, complete with its take on the Byron-esque dictum: ‘If humour be my folly, let satire be my song.’

Cover pages of both *Indian Charivari* and *Basantak* activate this public address, resonating the *Punch* of London, like their peers in other parts of India. In the *Indian Charivari*, a turbaned ‘Punchius Charivari’ or Mr. Punch of Calcutta sits poised with a hookah and fanned by tuskers, while in *Basantak*, an obese Brahmin transmogrification of Mr. Punch sits grinning at his audience (Figure 2). Humbly clad in traditional dhoti, he holds his sacred caste thread in one hand and a sheaf of manuscripts in the other. Around him are vignettes from the colonial city’s everyday life – broken carriages, drunken ‘natives’, public orators, and courting English couples. Mr. Punchis iconic pet dog Toby is replaced here with a crow, perched on Basantak’s shoulder. Both Punchius Charivari and Basantak declare their caste as that of *vidushaka* – the proverbial jester in Sanskrit drama. Yet Basantak’s self-staging takes on a mock-ironic form: his audience, he notes in the first volume, is a curious breed of neither Hindu, nor Muslim, but ‘Shaheb Bangali’ – Europeanized Bengalis – who, he fears, might brand him as ‘an old fool’, seeing his humble brahmin’s attire. To fit in, he promises to tear away his caste thread and hasten to join the ranks of westernized, caste-shunning Brahmos. His ritual manuscripts, he offers bind into a book, which is how sure would make him more acceptable to his ‘modern’ audience. At once public and polemical, Basantak’s mock lament attacks colonial modernity, its temporalities, rationalities, and symbols, in this case attire and education, both of which were central to colonial caricatures.

Started by the brothers Prannath Dutta and the artist Girindrakumar Dutta, both of whom stood at the heart of the colonial city’s caste politics and the growing political demands for municipal reform, *Basantak* is important for its polemic. While forging critical political demands for the middle class in contemporary municipal politics, its caricatures were steeped in social conservatism and mutual slandering. In this it was not far removed from its short-lived predecessor, *Harbola Bhand*, another Bengali illustrated humour magazine, or contemporary graphic satires published across vernacular periodicals, or in popular prints circulating in city streets and markets. In the *pata-s* (scroll paintings) of Kalighat or book illustrations of Battala’s cheap printed presses, *parihash* or social railley vented both class conflict and moral outrage at the ‘westernized’ manners of the urban elite. When the *patuas* – Kalighat’s scroll-painters, mostly disenfranchized rural migrants to the city, illustrated dictums like ‘Rarh, Bharr, Mithey Katha, Tin laye Kolkata’ – describing the colonial city as a trinity of prostitutes, clowns, and deceit – they were lamenting the breakdown of old rural patronage ties as a new urban aristocracy emerged in the city through comprador relationship to the English East India Company. Whether in *prahasan-s* or satirical plays, or street performances of the *swang-s* or festive pantomimes, caricature entered jibes and parodies, as a subversive tool for lampooning known figures, social classes, or even political events. Popular *swang* songs from the period make this mock-lament of doom palpable: ‘Holo ghor koli/Kare bolo boli/Samaj diya chhare khare/Shaheb shaje Bangali’ (Who do I narrate to, these grave dark times/chucking society to the dumps, Bengalis feign to be Sahibs).

Satirical literature had been proliferating in the city since the early nineteenth century, creating new spaces for the genre of *naksha* literature or sketches that often satirized the colonial city. Much before Kaliprasanna Sinha’s famous *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha* (1862) – the magnificent *tableaux vivants* of Calcutta akin to Dickensian sketches of urban foibles – the colonial city had emerged as a protagonist in Bhawanicharan Bandopadhyay’s *Kalikata Kamalalaya* (1823), as the *alay* (abode) of *kamala* or *Lakshmi* (Goddess of wealth in the Hindu canon) – a moneymaker’s submarine paradise, where the deity dwelt surrounded by sharks and
Through a dialogue between a nagorik – city-dweller – and a stranger from the rural hinterland, Bandopadhyay unfolded the dialectical co-existence of the divine and the diabolical in the ironic modernity of the colonial city, where modernity is compromised by the very conditions of its arrival. Bandopadhyay generated the moral-didactic tenor that became the staple of colonial caricatures. His Nabababubilash (1825) and Nababhibhitash (1831) released stereotypes that were to persist across colonial caricatures in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the naba-babu or the new-gentry, whom he described with the pun of phal-babu (literally, a flower-babu) – Bengali for a fop or a dandy, or babu who is also a ‘fool’; or the naba-bibi – often connoting the educated ‘new-woman’, whose escapades were seen to destabilize the already loosening moralities of the degenerate colonial city. The babu as urban gentility became a satirical stereotype of emasculation and verbosity, capturing at various points a decadent aristocracy, the nouveaux riches, English-educated urban elite, the emasculated hen-pecked husband, or the nationalist political editor. The educated new woman as the staple of social satire, on the other hand, became the signifier of an inverted world of gender hierarchies, both in courting men and shunning domesticity. Kaliprasanna Sinha’s Hutom thrust satire beyond these stereotypes, filtering instead, temporalities of the colonial city in its dense, fleeting and miscellaneous clamour, in songs, acts, rumours, and rhythms that made the city itself the body of caricature.

A conscious encounter with urban contemporaneity with its ‘farical, fantastic, fleeting’ quality makes caricature a carrier of modernity. This conscious immersion in and critique of the contemporary makes caricature both topical and dialectical. In the colony, caricature became also, the rhetorical staging of subjugated selves that both inhabited and resisted the colonized temporality of the city. Capturing both habitation and loss, laughter and lament, colonial caricature prompted self-ironical laughter that erupted through a ‘fertile relationship of contradiction’ with what the historian Ranajit Guha calls the ‘braided temporalities’ of the colonial city, which remained ‘irretrievably spilt’ between the time of the colonized and that of the colonizer. This self-conscious reflection, as historian Sudipta Kaviraj argues, was an imperative imposed by colonial modernity that thrust a ‘tragic dichotomy’ within the colonized subject: ‘either autonomy without modernity or modernity with the acceptance of subjection’. This negotiation was intellectual as much as social and political. Self-ironical laughter was the existential recourse of that section of the Bengali intelligentsia, which ‘could not answer this question simply, without contradiction and regret’.

This aesthetic and strategy of contradiction sits at the core of the ironic eye Gaganendranath Tagore activated in his caricatures. The artist was doubly marked by his own location as colonized aristocracy as well as participant and patron to the nationalist aesthetic of the Bengal School of painting that unfolded under the Swadeshi (self-rule) politics of the early twentieth century. His cartoons suggest texts of contradiction at multiple scales – forging critiques of both the colonized society as well as its nationalist consensus. Gaganendranath drew from stereotypes that had been sedimenting through the nineteenth century – dapper aristocrats, anglicized gentry, dubious priests – the basis of this iconography already laid out in the popular prints of the Kalighat pata-s. What set him apart from his lineages and peers, however, was the new narrative imagination he brought to the art of caricature, as well as an empathy that transformed both the political potential of caricature and the critical import of visual art. The titles of Gaganendranath’s three cartoon albums indicate the new ethical and formal scopes of cultural art that he visualized. In the preface to his first album, Birup Bajra, he offered a new role for the artist as well as for caricature: ‘When deformities go unchecked, but are cherished by blind habit’, he wrote, ‘it is the duty of the artist to show that they are ugly and vulgar, and therefore abnormal’. In the second album, Adbhut Lok – that he himself translated as Realm of the Absurd – he invoked Henri Bergson’s classic text Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic (1900) to introduce the comic as a ‘palpable absurdity’ – ‘the absurd realized in concrete shape’. The Bergsonian absurd runs through Gaganendranath’s caricatures, resonating Bergson’s dictum that the logic of the comic in its extreme form was that of the absurd; this absurdity too is ‘of a definite kind’: ‘It does not create the comic; rather [...] the comic infuses into it its own particular essence’. The artist himself appeared carrying a copy of the book in his very first album, in a cartoon depicting the ironic racism of westernized Indians in an already racially segregated colonial railway. In the third and last album Nava Hullod – Reform Screams: A Pictorial Review at the Close of the Year 1921, Gaganendranath’s ironic lacing of the absurd was sharper. Quoting the medieval Bengali poet Bharat Chandra – ‘Dekhibare mitra, korilam chitra, e boro bichitra hoilo tai’ (I draw pictures to see you, my friend; they appear hence, so curious: translation mine), and Mark Twain – ‘Every human is pathetic, the secret source of humour is not joy but sorrow. There is no humour in heaven’ – Gaganendranath interlaced curiosities with critique, laughter with rage. In each of these albums, he invented new tropes and poetics for the use of irony in visual humour – whether in notions of the birup – connoting estrangement, or deformity, the
adbhut or the strange or absurd – or in the idea of hallo in his last album that he fused with his own ironic translation as ‘scream’, suggesting rage, both connoting fads or/and their violence. In a marked absence of Gaganendranath’s own readings for his works, the aesthetic and political scopes of his caricatures, echoing the artist’s characteristic temperament, remain diffused across these citations he prefaces his albums with.

Gaganendranath Tagore’s realms of the absurd can be considered alongside the whimsical worlds of his contemporary, Sukumar Ray’s illustrated nonsense rhymes, Abol Tabol (literally translating to ‘gobbledygook’, published between 1915 and 1923). Roy had prefaced Abol Tabol with a caveat and curt apologia: ‘Iha kheyal rosh-er boi. Shutorang she ros jahara upob-hog korite paren na, e pustak tahader jonno nohe’ (This is a book of whims. It is hence, not for those who cannot savour the whimsical: translation mine).

The absurd, following Ray’s caveat, can be accessed only through the difficult routes of whim, through imaginative detours from reason. His subjects seemed to celebrate mismatch and dissonance, of forms, aspirations, and meanings, as colonial modernity and its rationalities hovered above and around his whimsical forms and prose as a hanging aura of incomprehension. The question of perspective was keenly woven into these texts of folly, caricature itself being a play with seeing and vision. Roy’s framings of the absurd in verses and drawings – of hybrid animals, moody monarchs, or belligerent babu-s – while very different from Tagore’s more directed social satire, inhabited a similar spectrum of the absurd in colonial Bengal, both inviting and alerting readers to the imaginative potential of humour and the absurd. Gaganendranath Tagore’s enraged subject crushing his offensive shadow on the cover page of Realm of the Absurd resonates curiously with Ray’s own realms of nonsense, both displacing in their own ways, the grammar of colonial modernity. In both, the absurd carried dialectical undertones, its poetics of non-reason itself a key to its critiques of colonial as well as bourgeois rationalities.

Yet, critique of colonial modernity, while at the heart of Gaganendranath’s caricatural aesthetic, is an inadequate frame for understanding his cartoons. For his satire suggests a critical eye that makes comic figuration itself a tool for transgressing the limits of humour in the colony. Reviewing his first album Birup Bajra, the noted English daily Hindoo Patriot had interestingly observed this crossing:

A glance at these cartoons will show that Mr. Tagore is not a wearer of cap and bell – not an irresponsible humorist only concerned to play with our weaknesses with the sole purpose of raising a smile – nor indeed a friendly optimist content to make fun of our faults and shortcomings. He is a serious critic of the many sins of the present day Bengalee life – keenly alive to the pity of things [...] What he has felt is certainly too deep for tears and the humorous verbiage he has chosen vainly covers the shrieks of his heart. And we have no doubt that these drawings will move many, as they are intended to do, to a feeling which is the opposite of mirth. (emphasis mine)

Gaganendranath Tagore is presented here as a serio-comic artist, at one end of the spectrum of caricatural art, where laughter might not even be the prompt or even intended response. Indeed the absence of laughter in some of Gaganendranath’s most iconic cartoons suggests complex caricatural aesthetic at work.

‘To a feeling which is the opposite of mirth’

The opening cartoon in Gaganendranath Tagore’s first album, Birup Bajra, captured his play with received stereotypes. A ‘species’ of an aristocratic babu stands tall on fragile bone china. He is split vertically, one half clothed in traditional Indian attire of dhoti-kurta, complete with a shawl and a chhari (walking stick), with footwear to match; his other half is decked in crisp European attire of suit and trousers, with monocles and boots. This split subject is Gaganendranath’s ‘Hybrid Bengalensis’, evidently a take on the established stereotype of the anglicized urban gentry. In his hybridity, this ‘species’, however, is an ironic embodiment of the colonial uncanny, an ambivalent subject of colonial modernity in the precarious grey zone of identities, whom the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha dully calls the ‘mimic man’. In his whims, this curious species reminds us of Sukumar Ray’s hybrid animals from his nonsense rhymes from the same period – the duckupine, the storkoise, and the elewhale – though unlike them the hybrid babu is unaware of his own awkward composition. In his smug poise, he is a curious presence, at once incongruous, proud, and fragile. A variation of this species surfaces in another cartoon in the Realm of the Absurd. In ‘Metamorphosis’ (Figure 3), Gaganendranath shows an Indian man attired in dhoti-kurta in the process of changing into trousers. In clumsy haste, he thwarted the railway guard as he announces on arrival: ‘Do not disturb me, I am about to become a Sab.’ His valise spills over with his careful ensemble – a necktie, socks, belt, shirts, and trousers – all the props that he requires to metamorphose into a sab – a master – in this case, the white colonizer. Sartorial juxtapositions like these expose instabilities of colonized selves, metaphors of bone china and ruptured valise capture vacillations between being and becoming, desire and dissonance. This complex play of ambivalence in imageries is
Gaganendranath’s unique intervention in lifting the babu stereotype out of mockery and into a commentary of the existential quandaries of colonialism.

In creating this brittle figure, Gaganendranath Tagore already used bulbous figuration, a style he would continue to develop in his caricatures. The arrogant subject is also the grotesque body here, the figurative style of distortion and exaggeration appearing time and again in Gaganendranath’s cartoons to symbolize different ‘deformities’ – class pride, patriarchy, false nationalism, fake religiosity. The sartorial too was his key tool in picturing the birup – his word for the incongruent, or ‘deformities’ – a word he himself uses in his introduction to Birup Bajra. The idea of hybridity in Gaganendranath is closely tied to this sense of the incongruent, a lament for the loss of taste, purity, and aesthetics. The birup in his idiom is also a signifier of what Bergson described as ‘mechanical inelasticity’ – movement without life, ‘something mechanical encrusted on the living’. Birup Bajra carried cartoons that visualized this comic automation. In the ‘University Machine’ (Figure 4), students are shown entering in hoards, the grind of the university machine built up with stacked books with towering chimneys of inkpots. As they enter the University Machine, they are attired in dhoti-kurta, carrying books, driven by a sense of purpose. They are churned out of the mills of fat books, however, as two-dimensional puppets, bereft of body, thought, and posture. The university appears to be the interface where the ‘self’ of the students is erased and reoriented. As mechanized products, some are attired as stereotypical government clerks, some as khansamahs, tailor-made to suit the ends of the colonial government and the market at large. Some of these puppets head straight towards the marriage bureau symbolized in the form of the topor (the traditional marriage headgear worn in Bengal). This trope of mechanization is repeated in another cartoon from the album, ‘Auto-Speechola’ (Figure 5), where a puppet-aristocrat sways wielding a copy of a speech in his hand, hung from a master machine – ‘a wonderful scientific invention of an Edison of Bengal’ as the artist reminds us. The machine is unique. It sports a steady pool of speeches ready for any occasion the puppet might require to address:
Memorial speeches, Self-Government speeches, Congress speeches, Foolish speeches, Fiery speeches, even select Bengali speeches, to suit the necessary occasion. The political puppet is kept functioning through an oilcan attached to his head and a ‘coup de grâce’ hatchet. Gaganendranath’s ‘Auto-Speechola’ is Bergson’s marionette, the ‘clockwork arrangement of human events,’ a ‘momentary transformation of a person into a thing’. He echoes here Bergson’s philosophy of ‘vitalism’ that celebrated the dynamism of human experience against the coarse logic and machinery of the nineteenth century. To Bergson, the comic was the corrective to the rigidity induced by mechanization. In ‘University Machine’ or ‘Auto-Speechola’, Gaganendranath combines rigidity and repetition as visual mechanisms to invoke dehumanization, a theme that runs through his cartoons in multiple tropes, signifying at various points the loss of self, authenticity, personality, or of human values of empathy, charity or honesty. Read alongside the writings one of Bengal School’s intimate interlocutors, Ananda Coomaraswamy, also a close associate of the Tagores, the polemical edge of the idea and ethics of birup becomes sharper. Writing Art and Swadeshi in 1907, Coomaraswamy had argued that beauty and ‘true morality’ were inseparable, lamenting ‘vulgarisation’ of aesthetic taste in colonized India. To Gaganendranath Tagore, this vulgarization is an invitation to caricature, a deformation in relation to a harmonious whole. Birup embodies this deformity, an estrangement from harmony and vitality, producing in the process, its own aesthetic of ugliness.

In his second album, Abdhut Lok – The Realm of the Absurd Tagore developed the artistic scopes of ugliness fully. The abdhut or the absurd repeats the trope of strangeness and contradictions by juxtaposing values of the sacred and the profane, of profit and piety. The attack here is on Brahmins and priests, a constant theme in Tagore, whether in the image of a priest scurrying along ‘1 Hindu Street’, tucking whisky and chicken under the cover of an umbrella, or that of a temple priest selling benediction in lieu of gold coins while eyeing slyly, a female devotee – ‘Purification by muddy water’ (Figure 6) – or in a demonic image of an obese Brahmin, sporting wine, flesh, and women, while religious texts are being thrown out of the window – ‘Imperishable sacredness of a Brahmin’. The theme of religious hypocrisy had been the staple of nineteenth-century popular art like Kalighat pata-s;


however, in Gaganendranath, the notoriety of Hindu priests gained a visual imagination of vulgarity and excess through his edgy expressionistic figuration. These grotesque bodies with their rugged lines are reminiscent of post-war German expressionist caricatures of George Grosz with their deep, contorted lines. Through heavy bulbous bodies, layered in fat and crooked skin, Gaganendranath visualized greed and vice that underlay veennes of religiosity. This grotesque figuration reappears to embody false nationalist pride in a cartoon like ‘My Love of my country is as big as I am’, where he caricatured the Maharaja of Burdwan as a rotund pompous man decked in European attire and flaunting authentic and immense patriotism.

This expressionistic imagination of the loss of harmony is sharper in Tagore’s last album Nava Hulod – Reform Screams. In the ‘Jatashur’ or ‘Millstone of Caste’ (Figure 7) from Realm of the Absurd, humour was eclipsed completely in a commentary on the perils of caste system. The cartoon showed a priest oiling millstones steered by the grinning skeleton of death, as hapless humans are crushed and thrust into the abyss. Gaganendranath titled the cartoon variously as ‘Jatashur’ – the demon of caste – and the ‘Millstone of caste’. With its gothic visualization of Brahminical oppression, the cartoon invoked the dark skeletal spectres of the Japanese printmaker Utagawa Kuniyoshi, an artist Tagore might have been familiar with due to his close assimilation of Japanese techniques.

This trope of the demonic persisted in his ‘scream’ series, most significantly in cartoons on dowry deaths. Lacing the album with Mark Twain’s ‘There is no humour in heaven’, Gaganendranath set out the dark address of satire at the very beginning, the idea of ‘scream’ becoming his connecting trope across political, social, and cultural norms and ‘events’ of the day. In the cartoon ‘Modern Marriage Market in Bengal’, a newly widowed man sits pouring over volumes of Shakespeare, while his mother consoles him with the prospect of a fresh child bride, fetched out fresh from an earthen vessel with a hairpin. The young bride is shown holding a Bengali primer in one hand and dowry in the other. Playing on vernacular symbolisms of keeping alive nutritious fishes like Koi and Magur in earthen pots, to be fished out every day for consumption by invalids, Gaganendranath shows the easy consumption economy in a marriage market dictated by dowry. Another cartoon in the same album, ‘The Rising Sun-in-law of Bengal’ is a dark visualization of a notorious incident that occurred in Calcutta in 1920, where a fourteen-year-old girl Snehalata immolated herself, unable to accept the fact that her father had to mortgage their house to procure the dowry money required for her wedding. In Gaganendranath’s cartoon, a child bride attired in a red wedding sari sits blindfolded, in the process of getting wedded to a can of kerosene with the face of a man, which the cartoonist calls ‘The Rising Sun-in-law of Bengal’. Her sari is tied to kerosene flowing out of the can, her hands join two matchsticks that serve as the hands of the man she is marrying. As her father looks on, the priest – a skeletal incarnation of death – reads out hymns from scriptures.

Caricature has been described often as ‘an aesthetic redemption of ugliness’, where distortion is not simple but has to be organically tied to the totality of form, making ‘disorganisation a “beautiful” portrayal that makes harmonious use of deformation’. This idea of ugliness in caricature is at once formal, corporeal, and moral, drawing attention to ‘the physical in a person when it is the moral side that is in question’. Physicality and distortion connect values of morality and beauty with those of the body and the person. It is ‘perfect deformity’ not ‘perfect form’ that caricature must capture, E.H. Gombrich had argued, to cut through the ‘outer to the inner being in all its littleness or

In his caricatures, Tagore achieves, in Baudelairian terms, a realization of beauty in the deformed and the distorted, quest for the sublime in the ugly, resonating in fact, what his uncle, the poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote for artistic beauty in his early-1920s piece, ‘The Meaning of Art’: ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty […] An artist may paint the picture of a decrepit person not pleasing to the eye, and yet we call it perfect when we come deeply conscious of its reality. Transforming the nature of caricature from mockery to sympathy, Gaganendranath was pushing caricature into the realms of grotesque realism that steered towards a disruption of the rarefied ideal of beauty that had come to symbolize the nationalist aesthetic temper of his times. This use of deformities and incongruence itself was Tagore’s political intervention that subverted the canons of idealism and classicism that the Bengal School had come to symbolize, planting thereby an aesthetic of dissonance at the heart of the assumed coherences of national-modern imagination. Tagore’s active political voice was, however, complex. He was closely tied to the prevalent Swadeshi mood in Bengal, both in promoting Swadeshi culture as well as maintaining close connections with nationalist extremists of the Anushilan Samiti. His aristocratic location and friendship with the Lieutenant-Governor, Lord Carmichael, made his political intervention a play with limits of political humour. This is famously captured in the anecdote of his cartoon ‘Peace reigns in Punjab/ ‘Terrible Sympathy’ (Figure 8) showing a whip-flashing gargantuan British official crushing miniature protestors, being displayed at the annual exhibition of the Indian Society of Oriental Art where Lord Charmichael was due to visit. Gaganendranath had juxtaposed form and meaning by naming the cartoon ‘Pronchondo Mamata’ – ‘Terrific Affection’, its irony duly noted by the Governor. Gaganendranath’s cartoons of Indian aristocrats, particularly the Maharaja of Burdwan and Congress politicians too reveal nuanced political commentary beyond binaries of anti-colonial politics, a reflection also as his daughter Purnima Debi notes, of his personality that used the indirect medium of the brush to puncture the egos of the political elite – both Indian and British.

Writing Gaganendranath’s obituary in 1938, the critic Nirad C. Chaudhuri observed that his caricatures were typical instances of pièces de circonstance, topical statements that were products of the ‘short burst of liberal propaganda in the second decade of the twentieth century’, the most lively voice of which was the Bengali magazine Sabuj Patra. Gaganendranath’s cartoons, he argued, were in mood and in temper, the graphic counterparts of the stories with a reforming purpose that Rabindranath Tagore contributed in this magazine. To Chaudhuri, Gaganendranath’s cartoons failed to rise above their moral-didactic purposes though he made the crucial observation that these images, although ephemeral, revealed the artist’s instinctive mastery over the ‘psychological implications of visual forms’. Charles Baudelaire’s distinction between two kinds of caricature might be useful here: his first type was the archival or the historical caricature that carried journalistic values, mainly due to the ‘fact’ it represents; and the second type contained, however, that ‘mysterious, lasting, eternal element’, which courted ‘the attention of artists’. Gaganendranath’s cartoons can be seen to inhabit a curious overlap of both types, where the event and topicality of the image is sublimated into a wider social address, the event itself signifying the existential, the comedic containing the tragic.

Within his brief cartoon phase, Gaganendranath Tagore forged, in his characteristic aloof manner, a method and an aesthetic of caricature with two distinct idioms of critique – the absurd and the grotesque, each pushing figuration into new territories of socio-political
symbolism. This places his humour apart from his peers, in a realm which was the ‘opposite of mirth’, as his reviewer rightly noted. Discussing the literary tradition of irony in Bengali literature, Sudipta Kaviraj makes an important differentiation between frivolous banter of literary sketches like that of Sinha’s Hutom, and the ‘tragic taste’ in the satires of the renowned novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. The latter, he notes ‘is informed by a much deeper and intricate understanding of the public fate of his people, a darkly ironic sense of history achieved through reflection upon the benefits and impositions of modernity’. The self-reflexivity in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s novels like Kamlakanter Daptar that Kaviraj focused on, carries what he calls ‘the complex and mature pleasures of self-criticism, asking what the self is, what are its historical and aesthetic possibilities’, this rumination itself, a ‘distinctly modern anguish’. In Chattopadhyay, Kaviraj writes, irony arrived at a ‘new dignity’, lifted from the field of ‘unserious mirth (upahasa, atitahasa)’ and turning into ‘a vehicle of something so serious as to be nearly unsayable’. A similar drift is visible in Gaganendranath’s cartoons, which can be seen to offer a visual counterpart to this aesthetic of dark humour, invoking what in Indian aesthetics is referred to as the tamasik rasa – the macabre. While a mild caricatural aesthetic and whimsical figuring was visible in Abanindranath Tagore in the mid-1910s, it is the ironic thrust in Gaganendrath and the aesthetic of pain that gives formal and political density to his caricatures. The trail of the tragic in Gaganendranath’s caricatures sets in motion a humanist critique in art that while fairly thin in the 1920s, offers lineages for the social realism more clearly visible since the late-1930s, particularly with the arrival of grotesque imagery during the wartime Bengal famine of 1943.

‘Quality of being present’

Gaganendranath Tagore’s caricatures came from the Bichitra phase at the Tagore household when new experimentations were being made in design – in architecture, craft, stage decoration, and printing. Gaganendranath’s cartoon phase, closely tied to the curiosities coming out of the Bichitra club, has often been seen as a brief detour between his more consistent phases of watercolours pre-1917 and his Cubist works post-1921. The cartoons are, however, more than an interlude. Despite the apparently disparate phases in Gaganendranath’s art – from his early brush and ink sketches of 1907–1911 and into the late-works of Cubist interiors and dreamworld imageries – the cartoons are threads that reveal the artist’s temperament, his arts of contradiction. Not only do they capture his penchant for drawing and portrait caricatures, they capture in fact, some recurring concerns in Gaganendranath’s art, which his complete silence, other than the brief notations in the opening pages of his cartoon albums, make difficult to access otherwise. Way more than moral-didactic notations of contemporary events and topics, Gaganendranath’s cartoons reveal the artist’s keen investment in contemporaneity, having what Baudelaire had described as that ‘essential quality of being present’.

They resonated temporal strategies that were deployed, for instance, by late-nineteenth century satirical sketches like Sinha’s Hutom Penchar Naksha – a ‘total investment with the present’ and a ‘metropolitan way of looking at the city’. This new ‘visual fidelity’ to the urban world also challenged ideas of the beautiful and the sublime. The cartoons tie together the questions of commentary, temporality, and art’s social and political potentiality. They are also his critical tools for exploring what Nirad Chaudhuri had duly noted as the ‘psychological values’ in his art.

The urban – as subject and idiom – while marginal to the art of the period, is dominant in Gaganendranath’s works. The city also leads him to capture the mundane and the marginal. It allows his fascination with materiality, both in his experiments with form – paint, ink, paper, and structure – as well as in his repeated subjects from the shadows and the fringes. The urban is the form of Gaganendranath’s palpable contemporaneity that runs through his landscapes, sketches, caricatures, and atmospheric watercolours. The artist is often a bystander, cataloguing crowds, pillared urban structures, city-parks, and bustling city streets. As early as his Crow series (1907) and sketches for his uncle, the poet Rabindranath Tagore’s, autobiography Jivansmriti (1911), he can be seen to experiment with distilled ambience, where crows perched on terraces and balconies or the quasi-concrete body of the rain-drenched city become central subjects. In almost monochromatic uses of black and controlled luminescence, Gaganendranath captures urban ambience in minimalistic compositions. His impressionistic urban-scapes of rooftops, slums, streets, alleys, and commuters, suggest the ‘dirty and ugly, narrow and cramped’ underbelly of the city, the work indeed of a ‘painter of the modern city’ despite the mythological, revivalist drives of the Bengal School that he inhabited and patronized.

Writing Gaganendranath’s obituary in 1938, O.C. Gangooly – a patron of the Indian-style and staunch critic of academic realism – suggested that despite his romantic treatments of themes and his Far Eastern ways of looking at nature, his pen and brush drawings of Indian crows, rural and urban landscapes carried traces of ‘novel and fascinating realism’. Gangooly noted, was a ‘realist’ in the most modern sense of the term. Even his experiments in abstract methods never reduced him from the ‘paths of realism’,
what Gangooly saw as 'a peculiar realism of the Impressionistic brand' that stretched across his 'romantic and realistic scenes of processions of Royal pageants, or of “Coolie’s Funeral”, the “Casting of the Image” in the river, – in “Street Scenes” of Calcutta in rain or shine, – “Diwali Nights” or “Buckland Bridge”’, the artist never losing grip on the 'actuality of life around him'. This idea of actuality is significant here, not only in reading Gaganendranath's caricatures but his dialogues with artistic modernity within the brief tenure of a decade-and-a-half. Realism in Gaganendranath is palpable, undefined, and significant. It speaks to sensibility rather than verisimilitude and perspective. His realism probably should be sought in his rejection of remoteness that saw him place his subjects, contexts, and milieux in his present, time and again. His realism lies also in his expressionistic use of colour and lines, light and darkness. A seldom-discussed painting, 'Coolie’s Funeral' (Figure 9), is striking here. His friend, the colonial official Marquess of Zetland described in his reminiscences of the artist, this painting that he had acquired, probably in the 1920s:

A sad procession is seen conveying the corpse of a factory-band along the street of a great city towards the setting sun. The mourners have emerged from the door-way of a prison-like building above which two circular windows lit up with a fierce glare reflected from the furnace within, give to it the appearance of a monster with bloodshot eyes gorging itself upon the bodies and souls of those who pass within. Here is an image of darkness – in form, subject, and address – probably the earliest invocation of the grim realities of industrial labour, all the more important for being placed in a quasi-mythic urban landscape as the symbol of class oppression.

Two essential ingredients of twentieth-century modern art – subjective distortion and abstraction – converge in Gaganendranath Tagore's visual worlds. The works from the 1920s, whether cubist compositions, or visualizations of dreamworlds, reveal a play of light and dark, of refracted colours and jostling forms that collide against each other. Forms – refracted and splintered – remain Gaganendranath's fancy, a play with rupture and contradiction that he deploys in whimsical ways through his works. A search for harmony is expressed not in celebration of the whole, but present-ness in and aesthetic habitation in fragmentation. Fragmentation – of both form and being – is a perennial concern in his works from the 1920s. The opening cartoon in this piece, 'Aparadhi Chhaya – The Offending Shadow' captures this tension, and as Gaganendranath stepped into yet another new phase of experimentation, one he is most discussed for – his Cubist period post-1921 – fragmentation took on another dimension. The artist was exploring the fragmentation of form, in interior spaces through the play of light and shade, but also through a fragmented sense of psychological interiority, particularly in his dreamworld images of the mid-1920s until these explorations were abruptly suspended with the artist's tragic paralysis in 1929. Gaganendranath's cubist paintings – a phase that immediately followed his fascination with cartooning – were described by the critic Stella Kramrisch in 1922 as not 'dissolution and fragmentation of the static, but of the dynamic character of objects which break up in cubes'. They do not build up a systematic structure, Kramrisch argued, but 'express turbulent, hovering or also pacified forces of inner experience projected into the cubistic form'.

Formal and psychological preoccupations intertwine in Kramrisch's readings, not only bolstering the spiritual, emotive dimension of Indian modernism that she was seeking to conceptualize, but pointing towards an expressionistic play with form and meaning that Gaganendranath Tagore characteristically deployed. Like his Cubist canvasses, his cartoons not only

sought to break down the coherences and the consensus of the society he inhabited, but set in motion within the pictorial frame, contesting meanings and moralities. The lament for the loss of harmony was in fact activated through the pictorial ruptures of exaggeration, disfiguration, and juxtaposition. Here is a materiality – an actuality – that makes Gaganendranath Tagore modernist, and connects his apparently disconnected forays into cartooning, cubistic works, even surreal dreamworlds of the late-1920s. As the artist is known to have noted in what is probably the only interview he gave, news techniques were stimulants to him, new methods for expressing his old themes in ever new ways.71

What O.C. Gangooly saw as Gaganendranath’s sense of actuality also points towards transformations that were taking place within the aesthetic of realism in late-colonial India. His cityscapes and cartoons come at a juncture when realism in Calcutta was shifting from its academic naturalist preoccupations to new sensibilities of social realism – a ‘strong, bold, virile and antisen- timental [sic]’ aesthetic rooted in the realities of the day.72 While this shift was more sharply visible since the 1930s, an early tension can already be seen in Gaganendranath Tagore, particularly important for being active in a space where realism was equated to deracination and a ‘western-style’ aesthetic framed in direct antithesis to the ‘Indian-style’ of the Bengal School. In their critiques of the colonial art school and its methods of imparting western academic realist traditions, the Bengal School had sought to reclaim ‘the native body from colonial discourses’ through a ‘renunciation of corporeality’, valorizing in the process desexualized idealized bodies, steeped in abstract ideals of beauty.73 The bhava or the emotive weight of the image was seen to be the carrier of its aesthetic aura, the materiality of bodies being secondary to the narrative drive of the image-as-affect. Gaganendranath Tagore planted the body – ruptured, oppressed, and distorted – at the centre of visual frame. In his concrete materializations of the social, the real, the grotesque, his caricatural figuration was both a mode of emancipating the figure from naturalism, and classicism.

To the artist Amina Kar, Gaganendranath’s cartoons through their ‘rough simplicity, harsh and violent in its results’, constituted ‘a kind of vernacular’ with a ‘massive physical impact’.74 This corporeality gave these images their political value. Their deep humanism was revolutionary – avant-garde too, for they revealed the artist’s restlessness not only with social mores, but also with inadequate, archaic methods and uses of symbols in visual art. Beyond stylistic departures, these cartoons, as the artist Amina Kar argued, present an ideological and artistic challenge to the Bengal School, carrying that ‘touch of irony and self-criticism that the whole art of the period lacked’.75

In their corporeality, Gaganendranath Tagore’s cartoons pushed the possibilities of realism to new scales, hinting at the arrival of the artist as the activist and commentator, an oppositional voice with the ‘irreverence and the irony of the revolutionary’,76 beyond the unidimensional advocacy of the national and the indigenous against the otherness of the colonial modern. This larger political potentiality, though subsumed both by Gaganendranath’s conscious nonchalance and perhaps too by that of his contemporary commentators, finds active, albeit unarticulated resonance in the caricatures of a political artist like Chittaprosad in the 1940s. Gaganendranath’s ‘realm of the absurd’ was as much a domain of caricatural laughter as it was of expressionistic fury, and came very close to this Communist artist’s cartoons on the dark sub-texts of decolonization in the closing years of anti-colonial struggle in India and Bengal marked by famine, partition, and communal genocide. The shared space between the aloof commitment of Gaganendranath Tagore and a politically committed artist like Chittaprosad is in the monumental handling of the human condition. The interrupted momentum of expressionist images that Gaganendranath’s cartoons and paintings like ‘Coolie’s Funeral’ represent, gains idioms and figures of full-fledged protest art in Chittaprosad. Experiences of famine, partition, and communal genocide had made embodiments of pain urgent and essential, and in Chittaprosad’s cartoons, caricature stepped out of its jocular, parodic intents to embody the ruptured arrival into postcolonial modernity. By introducing the possibilities of grotesque realism against the boundaries of conventional realism as well as pushing the narrative strength of images – Gaganendranath Tagore aestheticized the crude caricatural figuration dominant in late-nineteenth-century vernacular cartooning, while Chittaprosad worked within Socialist Realist idiom using caricature to disturb the utopian visions of both nationalism and socialism into new expressionistic figurations of displacement and insurgence.

Conclusion

From ink sketches to watercolour landscapes, cartoons to cubist compositions, Gaganendranath Tagore’s art suggests a refusal of affiliation, a denial of closure too. While his brother, Abanindranath Tagore sat at the core of the nationalist art movement with its circle of students, critics, patrons, and aesthetes, Gaganendranath Tagore was its curious partisan, supporting the movement more as patron than adherent. This simultaneous immersion and withdrawal – intrinsic to satire and irony – sits at the core of Gaganendranath’s aesthetic: a play with the arts of contradiction to conventions – social, political, or cultural. As an ironist, Gaganendranath Tagore can be seen to operate with an advanced
subjectivity, having ‘stepped out of line with his age’ and ‘turned around and faced it’, destroying the ‘given actuality’ of his age by the ‘given actuality itself’.77 His unique artistic personality of ‘dedication and disinterestedness’78 was a play with the emerging canons of modern art in the colony. It served, as Nirad Chaudhuri argued, ‘to put the public as well as the critic on a false scent’.79 Locating Gaganendranath Tagore remains thus, an exercise is pursuing an aesthetic of refraction – a dialogue in it itself, with the contours and shifts of modern art in India. As the artist played with politicoality and dilettantism, any appraisal and historizing too remains a play with possibilities rather than active affiliations. From the vantage point of the post-war, post-independence modern art in India, Gaganendranath Tagore's cartoons from the interwar period, place him not only at a point of culmination in the tradition of satirical iconography since the mid-nineteenth century, but more significantly, at the juncture of a new beginning of a caricatural ethic in art. Bed-ridden after a paralytic attack in 1929 and immobilized until his premature death in 1938, Gaganendranath Tagore is himself, an incomplete tryst with the modern. Situated right in the middle of his oeuvre, his cartoons reveal thereby a density that needs to be retrieved, not just to study the artist’s disposition, but for its potential resonances both for the genre of visual satire as well as the political unconscious of modernism in India.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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NOTES

2. The Bengali journal Prabasi notes the anger generated by Tagore's first album Birup Bajra: A Portfolio of Thirteen Satirical Pictures by Gaganendranath Tagore (Calcutta: Thacker and Spink, 1917). Reviews were reproduced at the beginning of Tagore's second album, Adhbut Lok.
4. Mikhail Bakhtin, Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays, trans. by Vadim Liapunov, ed. by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Slavic Series, 9, 1990), p. 120.
6. Some of these cartoons were published in the widely circulated highbrow periodical Modern Review and its Bengali edition, Prabasi, edited by Ramananda Chatterji. The cartoon albums themselves had more limited circulation, being expensive productions.
8. Tagore's daughter, Purnima Debi mentions his hobbies of photography, collecting rare toys and curiosities: Purnima Debi, Thakubarrir Gaganthakur (Kolkata: Punashcha, 1999), p. 35.
13. Basantak was integral to the demand of ‘ratepayers’ to enter local self-government, played out in the tussles between the ‘householders’ or grihastha-s represented by its editor Prananan Dutta vis-à-vis that of the landholding, aristocratic bhadralok babu-the abhijatas. See Rajat Kanta Ray, Urban Roots of Indian Nationalism: Pressure Groups and Conflict of Interests in Calcutta City Politics, 1875–1939 (New Delhi: Vikas, 1979), p. 34.
14. For critical and exhaustive studies of social satire in Kalighat pata-s, see W.G. Archer, Bazaar Paintings of Calcutta: The Styles of Kalighat...
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(Kolkata: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1921).


30. Bandyopadhyay, Gopal-Rakhal Dwandasam, p. 301.


32. Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994)


34. Tagore, Birupa Bajra, title page.


36. Ibid., p. 63.

37. Ibid., pp. 35–36.

38. Ibid., p. 57.


40. The circulation of German prints in post-war Calcutta is supported by not only the European travels of Rabindranath Tagore and availability of art catalogues and books, but also the exhibition of Bauhaus prints in Calcutta in December 1922. For multiple dimensions and resonances of this exhibition, see The Bauhaus in Calcutta: An Encounter of Cosmopolitan Avant-gardes, ed. by Regina Bittner and Kathrin Rhomberg (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2013)

41. I am referring here to Kuniyoshi’s Triptych of Takiyasha the Witch and the Skeleton Spectre, c. 1844.


43. Bergson, p. 114.


47. Saumyendranath Tagore, ‘Gaganendranath Tagore’, JISOA, 1972, p. 82.
48. Purnima Debi, p. 156.
50. Ibid.
51. Baudelaire, p. 147.
52. Kaviraj, p. 384.
53. Ibid., p. 387.
54. Ibid., p. 388.
55. For Abanindranath Tagore’s caricatural play in 1914–1917, see Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Abanindranath, Known and Unknown: The Artist versus the Art of His Times (Kolkata: CSSSC Archives Series, 2009); Debashish Banerji, The Alternate Nation of Abanindranath Tagore (New Delhi: Sage, 2010).
56. Bichitra was a club set up within the Tagore household at Joransanko, and was active between 1916 and 1920.
61. Images accessed at the digitized collections of the Victoria Memorial, Kolkata. Folder: R6911.
62. Tagore’s uses of black to capture ambience and expressionistic figuration has been noted by Ratan Parimoo. See Ratan Parimoo, The Paintings of the Three Tagores: Abanindranath, Gaganendranath, Rabindranath: Chronology and Comparative Study (Baroda: MS University of Baroda, 1973)
64. Ibid., p. 47.
65. Gaganendranath Tagore was a key patron of the Indian Society of Oriental Art that collected, displayed, and produced art discourse around the nationalist aesthetic of the Bengal School.
75. Ibid.
76. Kar, p. 71.
78. Kar, p. 66.