

150 Years of Calcutta's Heritage Art-College: A comprehensive study of its present declining situation

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Abstract:

Government College of Arts and Crafts is the oldest Art-Institute in India and had played a vital part in many modern art movements in South Asia. Sadly, this century old art-institute recently completed its sesquicentennial anniversary without the attention it deserved – the reason lays with its current decline. The present text will attempt an intimate discussion on the current degradation of this great art-institute and also endeavor to find some possible solutions.

Key words: Art Education, Bengali Art-Academy, Govt. Art-College, Visual Arts, Art of Calcutta, Government College of Arts and Craft.

Government College of Arts and Crafts aka Govt. Art College (GCAC), is a name that was conjugated with the history of south Asian art education for over 150 years. It undoubtedly creates epiphany among the art lovers of India and Indian Diaspora. It has a very prestigious past of fostering creative thinking and artistic endeavor since its inception. Govt. Art College is situated at the heart of Calcutta, beside the Indian Museum. The contributions of this colonial art college in the making of the cultural history of Bengal are unquestionable.

Govt. Art College was Bengali's first ever art academy¹ and with this institute the western art education entered into the Indian sub continent. But sadly most of the average Bengalis don't even know that the *Govt. Art College* was the epicenter of Bengali's modern art practice. It was this institute, which proved that *Bheto Bengali*² can also paint like the westerners and can compete with the colonial master in their own art practice. But in the twenty-first century, GCAC is slowly immersing into the darkness of crude oblivion; now the most obvious question appears is that, "will *Govt. Art College* survive for the future generations?" Let us begin the discussion with the early history of this archaic institute of visual arts.

Looking Back

The western academic art was introduced in India in the mid to late nineteenth century and largely transformed the general perception of art education in this sub-continent. This new style of art was introduced by the colonial masters to their Indian colonial subjects – both The *Indian Museum* and *Govt. Art College* had their share in this colonial history. But when and how conventional Art Education was started in colonial Bengal, and why? During the early half of British colonial rule, Calcutta³ was the capital of the India. Like any other colonizers, it was necessity for the British to rediscover and

¹ See *GCAC: Government College of Art & Craft. (2014). Retrieved April 15, 2015, from <http://gcac.edu.in/>.*

² "Bheto Bangali" (ভেতো বাঙ্গালী), literally means 'Rice eating Bengali', which refers to a physically/mentally inferior race compare to their British Colonial Masters.

³ Since the inception, this city was always been pronounced as "Kolkata" in Bengali. The British bestowed the anglicised name "Calcutta" in their early years and it was the official name until 2001, when it was altered to "Kolkata" as similar as the Bengali pronunciation. However the renowned Calcutta University's (the GCAC is affiliated to this university) name remained the same. GCAC was established in 1964, and that time the city was known as Calcutta, the former capital of British India and here in this text I am only using that name to allude to this city.

understand the socio-cultural nuances of the subservient nation ~ and from this necessity they established several institutions such as The Asiatic Society, Indian Museum, Archaeological Survey etc. The next logical step was to prepare a group of skilled craftsmen, who can efficiently draw/sketch the objects found in various surveys and excavation for proper documentation. The British clearly understood that it would be viable and economical to train local Indians rather than hiring professionals from Europe. The need gave birth to the first set of technical and industrial art-schools for the Indian students established in cities like Madras, Calcutta, Bombay and Lahore (Tomory 2013:280); these schools were modeled after the Mechanics Institute of England⁴. Finally, as a part of this new art educational venture, the "School of Industrial Art" was founded in Calcutta in 1839. The school's curriculum included making replicas of the sculptures, sketching from objects and basic design drawing. This new art-education trained the Indian in peremptory 'mechanical conventions' through an absolute 'utilitarian theory' that produced skilled craftsmen (A. Bhattacharya 2011: 45-47). In 1851, the colonizers organized the "Great Exhibition" which showcased the marvels of Indian Art schools in London⁵. This exhibition was highly appreciated and Indian artists, for the first time, had an opportunity to show their art works to the Europe, than the epicenter of modern world. Soon afterwards, in 1854, the *East India Company* reestablished the "The School of Industrial Art" in Calcutta and Zamindar⁶ *Pratap Chandra Singh* and his brother *Ishwar Chandra Singh* of Garanhata donated a mansion for the construction of the school building⁷. The new curriculum added British academic painting techniques (along with nature and

⁴ See, Kolkatar Sarakari Silpa Mahabidyalayer 150 Bachara Purti Upalakshye Bangadarsaner Pratibedana. (2015, March 24).

⁵ See Wilburn, Alayna. (2008). *Imperial Knowledge and Cultural Display: Representations of Colonial India In Late- Nineteenth And Early-Twentieth Century London*. University of Kentucky.

⁶ Zamindar – wealthy landlord.

model study), metal/wood engraving, lithography, pottery and clay/wax sculpture. From 1855 onwards, the school started an annual exhibition of art works produced by the students, which until today, is an integral part of this Art-school tradition. After the cessation of the *Sepoy Mutiny*, the colonial British Government took the charge of this art-college from the *East India Company* and changed the name to "Government School of Art", the school also shifted to Bowbazar Street, Calcutta. Due to this transformation, on 29th June 1864, British artist Henry H. Lock was appointed as the first principal of this art institute⁸. Under his supervision, by 1874 to 1875 about 105 Indian students complete their fine-art courses. The same year, an art gallery was opened at Bowbazar Street to attract the general public and to educate them through various art works⁹. In 1892, the art-school received its own institution building and shifted for the last time to its present location adjacent to the *Indian Museum*.

But the history of the *Govt. Art School* would be incomplete without mentioning great art scholar E. B. Havell. In 1896, a well known British artist and art-historian Ernest Binfield Havell (1861 – 1934) joined as the principal of this Art School. Havell had an outstanding interest in Indian art he was undoubtedly the first British to appreciate it for its own value (Tomory 2013:280). The college since commencement was faithfully following the academic art teachings of *Royal College of Art*, but under Havell's principalship this orthodox academic syllabus received several changes. In 1901, at the educational conference in Simla, presided by Lord Curzon (then the Viceroy of India), Havell's recommendations of emphasizing a new art-school syllabus based on Indian tradition and heritage was approved¹⁰. Soon, in 1905, Havell appointed eminent Indian artist Abanindranath Tagore (1871 – 1951) as the Vice

⁷ See *GCAC: Government College of Art & Craft*. (2014).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Principal (who also officiated as the Principal from 1906 to 1908) of this institute. Abanindranath was the first Indian artist to join this institute as a faculty member. Havell along with Abanindranath attempted a new approach of art education, which would motivate students to avoid the stiffness of the Western Academic Realism and to imbibe the true Indian spirit in their art works. With Havell's unfeigned adjutant, Abanindranath formed the "Indian style of painting", which would later form the basis of the *Bengal School of Art*¹¹. This new art education was closer to Indian culture and it provided the Indian students an essential freedom from the influence of the British academic art and made them capable of expressing themselves in creatively. Among the students of "Indian style of painting" the most significant was Nandalal Bose (1882 - 1966), who, after completion of his art education, joined Rabindranath Tagore's *Kala-Bhavana*¹² at Santiniketan as the very first principal instructor and initiated a new chapter of modern Indian art¹³.

After Indian independence, the newly formed Government of West Bengal took charges of this art institute and in 1951 the school's name once again changed to "Government College of Art and Craft", the name that identifies it today.

¹¹ Abanindranath Tagore was the founder and principal artist of the influential *Bengal school of art*, which constructed the foundation of the modern Indian art. For more information about Abanindranath Tagore and the Bengal School see Tomory, E. (2013). *A History of Fine Arts in India and the West*: 280-283; Wani, W. M. (2013). Revisiting Modern Art in India prior to Independence: A capsule account of beginnings, confrontations, conflicts and milestones: 1379; Gupta, M. (2012). *SHILPE BHARAT O BAHIR BHARAT*: 153 – 158.

¹² Kala Bhavana is the Institute of Fine Arts of the *Visva-Bharati University*, founded by Rabindranath Tagore in 1919. It is a well-known institution of Fine-arts education and research.

¹³ Nandalal Bose's teaching was the basis of Santiniketan School and led the development of modern Indian art. For more information about Nandalal Bose and Santiniketan School see Tomory, E. (2013). *A History of Fine Arts in India and the West*: 281; Wani, W. M. (2013): 1382 – 1383; M. (2012). *SHILPE BHARAT O BAHIR BHARAT*: 160 – 166.

Those Golden Days

The twentieth century, especially the early-mid to the late-mid twentieth century, was the golden era of *Govt. Art College*, when it produced many renowned artist and art scholars and also actively participated in the development of prominent art movements. The post-independence decades observed many successful artist, scholars and academicians coming out of this art-college and participated in the elevation of the Indian modern art scene. Not only is that, since its inception, *Govt. Art College* is playing a vital role to influence and nurture many other art-academies of this sub-continent. This alludes towards a century-old affinity between *Govt. Art College* with Rabindranath Tagore's *Kala-Bhavana* at Santiniketan ~ this affinity resembles the reciprocal thread between the *Guru* (teacher) and *Shishya* (disciple)¹⁴. But this connection didn't end with Nandala Bose, many renowned artists from *Govt. Art College* followed the course of Nandala and continued this cultural exchange even in the twenty-first century. Noted painter Jogen Chowdhury (Born 1939) graduated from *Govt. Art College* in 1960 and later joined *Kala-Bhavana* as a professor of art and there were many more virtuosos like him¹⁵. And this tradition doesn't exhaust with *Kala-Bhavana*: Acclaimed painter and first female Dean of the Faculty of Visual Arts, *Rabindrabharati University* (Calcutta), Prof. Shanu Lahiri (1928-2013) was a student of this institute. The competent students of *Govt. Art College* always hoisted its flag beyond the international boundaries of India and influenced the

¹⁴ Ibid. However, this connection is much more internal than artistic, as art style and methodically both of these art-institutes are far different from each other.

¹⁵ List of Chowdhury's predecessors and successors from *Govt. Art College*, who successfully taught at *Kala-Bhavana* and continued the legacy, is quite long; it includes names such as Asit Kumar Haldar (1890-1964), Kshitindra Nath Majumdar (1891-1975), Somnath Hor (1921-2006), Sarbari Roycaudhuri (1933-2012), Bipin Goswami (B.1934), Sanat Kar (B.1935), Lalu Prasad Shaw (B. 1937), Ashok Bhowmik (B. 1953) etc.

world art practice – most significant among them were Joynul Abedin (1914–1976) and Kamarul Hasan (1921–1988) the founding fathers of the modern art/art-education of Bangladesh. Many of the early art-scholars of Bangladesh were graduates of *Govt. Art College* and this influenced them to model their national art-academies after this art-college. For over the century, *Govt. Art College* connected, educated and inspired the artistic talents of this sub-continent and is still engaged in this pursuit, but the present declination is perhaps the worst possible hindrance that it ever encountered.

Present Situation

Bygone days are history today and *Govt. Art College* is only surviving with those olden memories. Within a few decades after the independence, declination started and eventually increased with the passing time. In 1983, the B.V.A. (Bachelor of Visual Art) degree course commenced with the affiliation of Calcutta University; then in 1998, the M.V.A. (Master of Visual Art) course and finally in 2003 the PhD course was introduced with the same university's affiliation¹⁶. But instead of a revival, these educational tactics exacerbated the degradation. Here I will attempt to discuss how and why this happened.

Poor Infrastructure

In 2009, *Govt. Art College* received 'Grade-A' certification from the NAAC (National Assessment and Accreditation Council) but this couldn't impede the decaying infrastructure of this college. Since last few years, the Principal's position, which was once occupied by luminaries such as Havell, Percy Brown, Chintamani Kar, is laid vacant – in the absence of the principal, 'office-in-charge' Mr. Chandan Das¹⁷ is the de-facto acting in

¹⁶ See Bandyopadhaya, S. (2013, September 13). Drsyakalay Dersho. *Ei Somay*.

¹⁷ Mr. Das is an Associate Professor at the Print-making Department of this college.

charge of this art-college; one doesn't need any special knowledge to perceive that this administrative dent is a huge obstacle for any productive deliberation towards the development of the college. Unlike any other prominent institute of the same status, *Govt. Art College* still relies on laborious manual process for data entry and other archival works. *Govt. Art College* has total seven independent departments¹⁸ to offer B.V.A. and M.V.A. degrees and one post-graduate department (Print-Making). The old college building was built by the British and it still holds the foundation years, sculpture department, the entire Western and Indian painting departments¹⁹, administrative section and the library²⁰ – it's effortlessly assumable the terrible condition of the classrooms/studios situated here. Within last two decades, the student strength increased to almost triple while the basic amenities, such as class-room, studio, exhibition hall remained the same as it was in the post-independence era. This college housed many important historical art-works, rare books, photographs and archaic documents and to preserve them, it desperately requires digital archiving and a permanent museum. Although it has a century-old enriched library²¹, but has not enough staff to control book theft and malicious activities. According to the current librarian, there is no available fund for preserving antic books (Bandyopadhaya 2013). Noble laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore once spent a brief creative tenor at this art-college – the room adjoined to the

¹⁸ Seven departments are – 1) Western Style (Oil) Painting, 2) Indian Style Painting, 3) Sculpture, 4) Graphic Design/Applied Art, 5) Textile Design, 6) Ceramic Art & Pottery and 7) Wood & Leather. Along with it, the college has additional subjects such as Art-History, Theory of Art etc.

¹⁹ Since the time of Abanindranath Tagore, *Govt. Art College* has two separate painting departments – the first is the conventional *Western Style Painting* and the second is *Indian Style Painting*. Both of these two departments currently offer graduate and post graduate courses.

²⁰ The other departments are situated in separate newly constructed buildings within the same campus.

²¹ The library is considered the best among all other Indian Art-college libraries (Bandyopadhaya 2013).

Principal's room is a part of that glorious history. Beside Tagore's memory, this room also contains amazing art works by noted sculpture and ex-principal of this college Prof. Chinatamani Kar (1915 – 2005); but unfortunately the room and its priceless belongings are currently being neglected and possibly damaged²². The institute ignored the need to have a regular art-work restoration-preservation unite to teach as well as serve the art-college. There is no proper display place for the art works created by the students and teachers – a state-of-the art exhibition centre can solve this problem. Within the college campus, the students need a hygienic eatery, a computer centre, an art-material shop and an inbuilt auditorium for recreational activities. The students of this college also lack proper residential hostels for male and female students. *Govt. Art College* currently has no special facility to host any international student and this should be considered as a serious threat to the reputation of this art-college.

Art-Education

With the dawn of the new techno-savvy century, like any other archaic educational institute, *Govt. Art College* is facing various palpable challenges. Despite the ponderable threats from the various national and state level animation and multimedia institutes, *Govt. Art College* failed to develop any such specialized stream. In 2003, due to the U.G.C.²³ norms, the college shrunk its previous B.V.A. course from 5 years to 4 years but the college and its unprepared faculty wasn't able to absorb this unanticipated transformation with the incessant pressure of the growing number of student. Following this, the

²² The reason is simply bureaucratic negligence. Sumtro Bandyopadhaya observed that the room also contains several priceless art works by the ex-principals of GCAC but there is no possible way enter the room art-work restoration/preservation purpose as it has four different keys kept with four different officials; see Bandyopadhaya, S. (2013, September 13). Drsyakalay Dersho. *Ei Somay*.

²³ *University Grants Commission (UGC)* is a statutory organization of the Government of India.

BVA degree nomenclature is changed to BFA (Bachelors of Fine-Arts) but astonishingly the syllabus remained unaltered since last quarter of a century²⁴. The roomy Mural unite, which caters to the students of painting departments, is controlled by only one faculty member of Assistant Professor rank. Since 2000, the teacher strength has decreased from 45 to 23, and it greatly dispelled the healthy student-teacher ratio. Sadly the current faculties, many of whom are practicing artists, aren't well equipped to grasp the additional post-graduate stress which is fatal for both the students and the institute; for example, the entire pressure five academic years (three years of BVA and two years of MVA) of the Western Painting department is guided by only three faculty members, one of whom is also engaged in administering the Mural unit. The BVA and MVA students have no separate display place. It is also deficiency of the college that it provides very little scope of research for the BVA and MVA students, who largely remained naive in higher level academic research. The MVA students are forced to share studio space with the undergraduates. Until recently, for various such reasons, it used to take three years to complete the two years MVA course. Naturally the newly added MVA course affected the creative and quantitative performance of the college, rather than improving it. The last addition to this series of 'educational reforms' was the introduction of the PhD course: Was it a wise decision? We'll separately discuss it in the following section.

Unsuccessful PhD Course

The PhD in Visual-Arts course started in 2003 with the affiliation from Calcutta University. But it was certainly an imprudent step for an art-college which was already suffering

²⁴ Celebrated painter and academician Ganesh Haloi (B. 1936) was one of the committee members who designed the BVA course in the 1980s, which is still followed in this art-college without any necessary alteration. See Haloi, G. (2013, September 13). Aitihyer Gunei Bhalo Kaj Sikhe Ber Hoy Chatrachatrira. *Ei Somay*.

with the over burden of the post-graduation. Since the inception, it's been twelve long years but the institute couldn't produce one single "PhD Graduate" – this would be enough to question the existence this higher-study programme. The PhD students are the most marginal section of the art-college community. The students aren't even connected with each other and grossly engaged individual study and research. However, until today, there isn't any decent study/research space available for the registered PhD students. Every year, many aspiring young students staunchly compete for this course. Most of them believe that this additional higher educational degree would do wonder to their CV, but regrettably almost all of them end up losing valuable years for this seemingly otiose pursuit. The more fatal side of this futile PhD course is that it eventually dries out the artistic skills of the PhD scholars in its lengthy pursuance. The primary reason for the failure of this doctoral course comes with double fold – A) untrained faculty members, and B) absence of proper PhD curriculum and syllabus.

A) Untrained faculty members: The current faculty members of *Govt. Art College* are completely untrained in the means of doctoral research/education. Among the 23 faculty members, only two have PhD degree²⁵. Many don't even know how to write and where to publish research articles, which is considered as an important part of the doctoral research. Certainly, as a consequence most of the PhD students are unsuccessful of getting appropriate guidance for their Doctoral research. And the next reason for ineffectual PhD course starts from here.

B) Absence of proper PhD curriculum and syllabus: Due to the above mentioned reason, it's very obvious that the PhD course

²⁵ Source of this information- *GCAC: Government College of Art & Craft*. (2014).

has a deficiency of pertinent course curriculum and syllabus. The present system is confused between the studio based art-practice and the academic research oriented education. The undefiled PhD students²⁶ become the victims of this confused doctoral course. This deficiency also leads to undesirable delays in completion of the course.

Degrading Popularity of Fine-Art in Calcutta

Since the independence, *Govt. Art College's* location at the heart of Calcutta has provided some additional prominence to this institute; this also adds to its proximity with some significant exhibition centers such as *Academy of Fine-Arts, Gaganendra Shilpa Pradarshashala* and *Gallery88*. But it wasn't the same Calcutta that once belonged to Rabindranath Tagore, Hemendranath Majumdar, Jamini Roy or more recently Satyajit Ray. Due to the rapidly growing urbanization and mass politicization in every level, the average Bengali²⁷ public is now nonchalant about visual-arts practice and far from buying or collecting it²⁸. The Calcutta based art-market in Bengal, until 1980s was lagged behind in compare to the cities like Delhi or Mumbai and still is comparatively 'mild' (Sanyal 2011). The students and teachers of *Govt. Art College* are categorically immensely affected with this slowing art-market, the market that supposed to be their source of bread and butter.

²⁶ Most of them were once MVA students of GCAC, who are impeccable in their own field of practice based studio-art, but have very scanty academic research experience. (source: Author's personal communication with various current PhD student of this institute)

²⁷ Here I specifically mean Bengali of Calcutta or West-Bengal and this doesn't include Bengalis from Bangladesh or any other place.

²⁸ For a closer picture of this scenario, see Sanyal, S. K. (2011, March 1). Kolkata's Contemporary Art A Look in the Mirror. *Artetc: News & Views*; Biswas, S. (2000, September 4). Death Of The Bhadrak. *Outlook*; Chaudhuri, A. (2000, September 4). Slipping Into Silence. *Outlook*; Ghosh, S. (2015, January 3). Decline of Bengal, death of the bhadrak. *Hindustan Times*;

Oblivious Media

One of the major factors related to this present degradation is the crude ignorance of the local print and more particularly screen media houses. In this regards, *Govt. Art College* is admittedly far behind than other art-colleges in Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore or Baroda where local media endeavor to highlight them. In this instance it would be appropriate to mention the recent media upsurge about the upgradation of a century-old Calcutta college into an independent state university, while on the other hand the sesquicentennial anniversary of *Govt. Art College* failed to receive any such attention. However, this doesn't include the negative media coverage on ignominious incidents related to *Govt. Art College*²⁹ which is assuredly accelerating the degeneration.

Feasible Resolutions

There are still some viable options to improve this declining situation, but this positively requires an united effort from different stakeholders of the society. The art-college requires genuine interest from both the ruling political administration and from the local media. There is no doubt that the *Govt. Art College* needs to recruit a groups of talented hard working teachers. It should once again re-evaluate and refurbish its graduate and postgraduate courses according to the current international standard – for this and also for redesigning the doctoral course, it should take help from an expert committee consists of academics, social scientists, professional artists and designers. Immediately the college administration should

²⁹ For example the print/screen media unreservedly covered the recent incident of Fake Tagore paintings. See Paul, Prasanta. (2011, March 12). Fake Tagore paintings kick up a controversy. *Deccan Herald*; Bhattacharya, Snigdendu. (2013, October 2). Kolkata art college ex-head guilty in Tagore fakes case, says CID. *Hindustan Times*; Niyogi, Subrata. (2014, June 29). Call for expert panel to scan masters' art. *The Times Of India*.

suspend admission to its PhD course for next few years and use this time to complete the course for currently registered PhD candidates; in addition the college can utilize them (the PhD candidates) as additional teaching and research support. Similarly, the number of seats in the MVA course should be reduced from the current size. It would be beneficial for the institute to start a full-fledged restoration and preservation unit, which will work professionally along with educating. Developing a fully equipped animation/multimedia department would upgrade the college's current standard and fulfill the needs of the future students. In addition it should also reestablish all the departments with new equipments and studio space. The college library needs to be fully digitized and required more dedicated staff for unruffled functionality and maintenance. Finally, an inbuilt gallery cum exhibition space can solve the display related issues and will help *Govt. Art College* to reinvent its past glory.

Epilogue

It follows the above discourse that the present situation of *Govt. Art College* has substantial evidence of its deterioration and there are also feasible solutions to ameliorate. In the 19th century, with the British initiative of new approach in art-education opened the doors for western art-education to locals at a time when the archaic Indian art traditions were suffocating: the *Govt. Art College* played an important role in that history and its anecdote is adhered to the history of Bengal's modern art education. The current crisis period is almost similar to the situation emerged in the post-independence era³⁰, when the British handed over the college

³⁰ Veteran painter and ex-professor of GCAC Ganesh Haloi remembered that during the centenary celebration of this college, it was the concerned students and teachers who devoted themselves for this institute and accelerated the intellectual and artistic growth GCAC. See Haloi, G. (2013, September 13). Aitihyer Gunei Bhalo Kaj Sikhe Ber Hoy Chatrachatrira. *Ei Somay*.

administration to the Indian authorities. That time it was the students and teachers of this institute who overcame the hurdle with dedication for their art-college; this persistence earned *Govt. Art College* a creditable reputation for bringing some of the most important modern artist of India during their earliest struggle. This is the legacy of the *Govt. Art College* that until today Calcutta claims to be one of the pioneering centers of Indian art education. But due to the present socio-political condition, we are near to lose these opportunities with unfulfilled resolutions. The art-college is a powerhouse of talents and it is necessary for the college to comprehend its own potentials. Its main distinctiveness lied in incorporating the creative skills with the current trends in art-education. The impulses of the 1950s/60s are yet to be rediscovered once again for the sake of the survival of this heritage art-college.

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