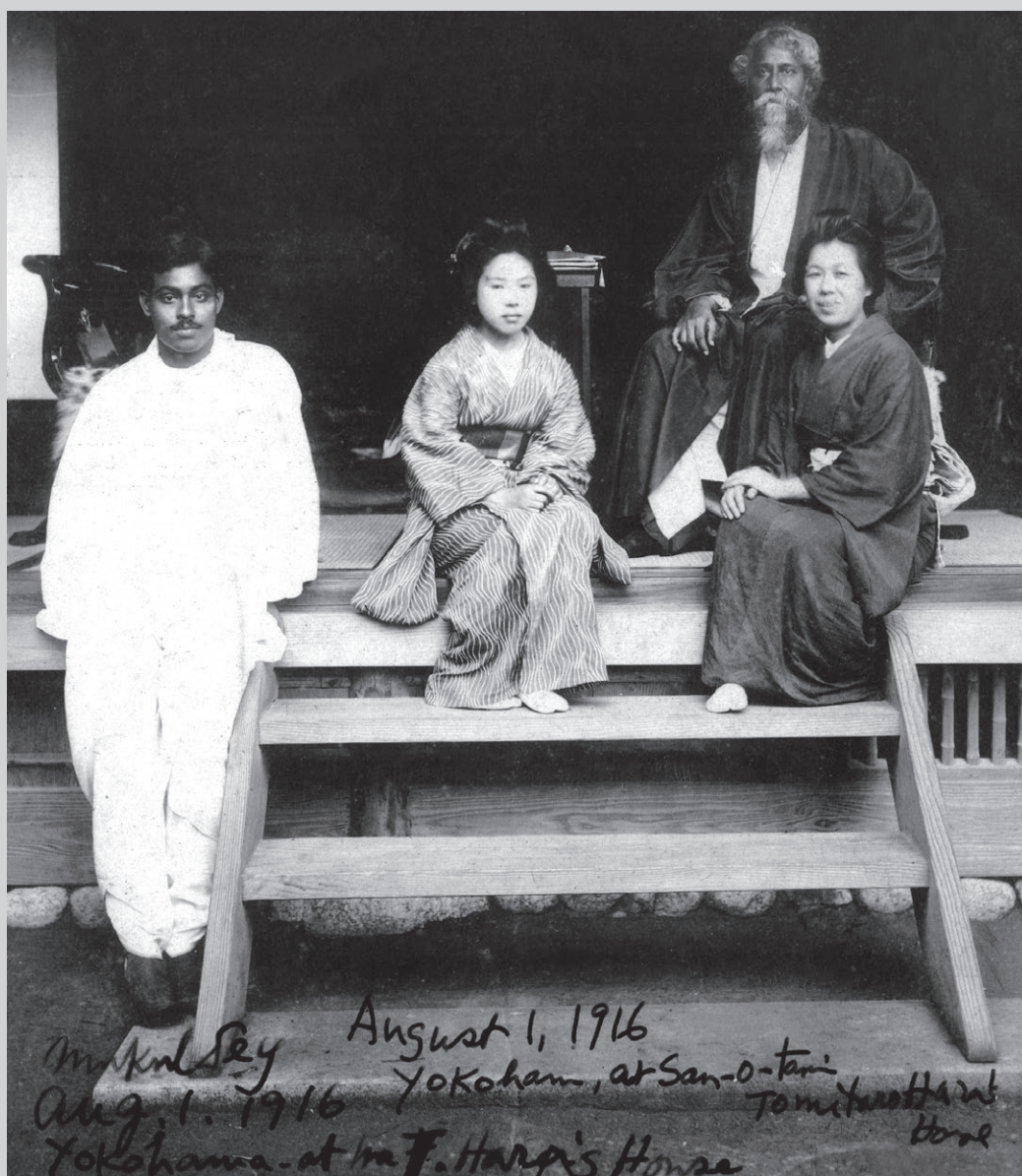


Mukul Dey: an autobiographically modern Indian artist¹

One of the most persistent tropes in the study of South Asia has been the emphasis on collectivity and the formation of collective identities. In much of the older scholarship especially (but still persisting in a great deal of “common sense” contemporary understanding), the forces of religion, caste and the extended family are conceived of as somehow playing a much greater role in the framing of human subjectivity in the subcontinent than they do in other parts of the world. There has even been the suggestion, from one anthropologist, that South Asians could be best understood as “dividuals,” with a sense of personhood and agency derived largely from sources external to the self.²

Adrienne Fast



Mukul Dey (far left), Rabindranath Tagore (top right) and two Japanese ladies. Photo taken in Yokohama, 1916, two years before Dey's first trip to the Ajanta caves. Image courtesy of Mukul Dey Archives.

and his aspirations of middle-class respectability, the professional Bengali artist emerged as both a producer and a product of South Asian modernity; one which offered a profoundly new way to perform middle-class identity in the colonial context.

Performing the social role of the modern professional artist was by no means an easy or straightforward undertaking, as this was an environment of limited exhibition and sales opportunities as well as radically shifting patterns of patronage and art education. In such a difficult environment, it is useful to ask what kinds of opportunities (or risks) biographical writing might have offered artists who were struggling to carve out spaces of both economic opportunity and cultural capital for themselves. How did biographical writing provide a means by which to introduce a new kind of social entity – the modern, professional Bengali artist – to its public? And given the centrality of literature and the written word to Bengali cultural identity (then as now), were visual artists in Bengal particularly compelled to participate in the textual world in order to claim a role for themselves in public life?

There are a number of Bengali artists who began to write autobiographically during this period, including Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) and Sudhir Khastgir (1907-1974). But Mukul Chandra Dey (1895-1989) offers a particularly useful case study when thinking about the autobiographical Bengali artist. First and most obviously, the narrative trajectory of Dey's own life intersects and engages with an incredibly rich cultural history of late colonial Bengal. He was a student at Rabindranath Tagore's experimental education project in Santiniketan at the very beginning of the twentieth century, when it was still in its earliest ashram-like period and before it became Visva-Bharati University. After Rabindranath Tagore became the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize (for literature in 1913), Dey accompanied him as his protégé and assistant on a highly feted tour of Japan and America. Dey had already demonstrated his artistic inclinations long before this trip, and had even tried his hand at etching plates for printing while still in India. But it was during this trip to the US that Dey gained significant training in printmaking, and he even became associated with the Chicago Society of Etchers. When he returned to India in 1917 Dey brought with him a rare and valuable asset: a functioning etching press. For the next few years Dey struggled to make a living as an artist in Bengal, before he eventually set sail for England in pursuit of further art education and training. He remained in England for seven years, studying first at the Slade School and later at the Royal College of Art. He exhibited and lectured extensively in London, and he became friendly with a veritable laundry-list of notable artistic figures of the day including Laurence Binyon, Muirhead Bone, Augustus John, and others. When he eventually returned to India in 1927, Dey was appointed the first Indian principal of the Government School of Art in Calcutta; a post he held (sometimes tenuously) for about fifteen years. As an educator and arts administrator Dey influenced an entire generation of artists in Bengal, both through his curricular initiatives and by virtue of the fact that his own career trajectory provided students with an instructive model for them to follow (or rebel against). Although he produced large bodies of both painting and photographic work, Dey was primarily a print artist; he was one of the few artists of the period to truly specialize in printmaking media and he particularly pioneered the drypoint etching technique in India.

BUT ONE OF THE CHARACTERISTICS most commonly associated with the emergence of a self-conscious modernity, in India as in the West, is an intensified belief in (and glorification of) the autonomous individual, supposedly freed (or freer) from external social and religious pressures and self-governed by a rational and moral authority. Of course, it was particularly during the late colonial period that this model of the emancipated, independent individual gained cultural capital in India, and this was also precisely the same historical moment when systems of Orientalist ethnography were beginning to argue – and colonial systems of administration were working to encourage – the belief that collective identities were dominant in India; that India was a collection of castes and religions, rather than of individuals. As a consequence, the experience of being both modern and Indian in the late colonial period implicated a very specific, but not altogether globally uncommon, sense of anxiety. On the one hand it demanded an appreciation and a cultivation of the unique individual, while on the other hand it also presented a very real unease that one's own personhood was somehow incommensurate with individualism, and hence also with modernity itself.

The literary genres of biography and autobiography have long been associated with the growth of modern individualism in the West; in their emphasis on the production of unique individuals, biography and autobiography have routinely been read as markers of the emergence of a particularly modern (and usually exclusively Western) form of historical consciousness. Thankfully, in recent decades many historians of the non-West have done much to complicate this view by tracing

diverse histories of life-writing throughout the world and from a wide range of time periods. But nevertheless, during the late colonial period in South Asia the literary forms of biography and autobiography very actively participated in the kind of anxiety of Indian modernity that I have just described. On the one hand, there was a veritable explosion of writings in the first-person singular documenting individual lives in India from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Yet there was also a real concern about whether such texts that focused on a single individual were appropriate for South Asian subjects. As Gandhi famously noted in the introduction to his *My Experiments with Truth*, he was cautioned by a good friend against writing such an autobiography on the grounds that it was “a practice peculiar to the West. I know of nobody in the East having written one, except amongst those who have come under Western influence.”³

Producer and product of modernity

As an art historian, I am particularly interested in the entry of visual artists into this contested field of modern biographical production during the early decades of the twentieth century in Bengal (both present-day Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal). This was a historical and cultural context of extraordinary social transformation and upheaval, but it was also a period of great possibility when there emerged a number of radically new social roles and ways of being in the world. One such remarkably new social entity was the figure of the modern, urban, aspiring-to-be-middle-class, working Bengali artist. Distinguished by his (very rarely “her”) relationships with new forms of urban patronage, his aggressive self-promotion,

Autobiography as artistic practice

Perhaps even more important, for our purposes, than his own fascinating biography is the fact that Dey also wrote and published extensively, including three texts that can be called autobiographical. The first of these was his *My Pilgrimages*



GENERAL VIEW OF AJANTA CAVES, SHOWING CAVES 1 TO 17.

to *Ajanta and Bagh* (hereafter, *My Pilgrimages*), which was first published in 1925 and later reprinted in 1950. The second was a self-published book called *My Reminiscences*, which Dey produced in 1938. And finally, Dey's third autobiography is the Bengali-language *Amar Kotha (My Story)*, which was published posthumously in 1995. Covering as they do the full extent of Dey's long career, a brief look at each of these texts in turn offers a useful insight into the role that autobiography could play as a strategy of artistic practice for Bengali artists, from the early twentieth century to the end of it.

In *My Pilgrimages*, Dey recounts two journeys that he undertook to the famous Buddhist cave temples at Ajanta and Bagh, both in western India, with the stated purpose of studying and making copies of the frescos therein. Since their rediscovery in the early nineteenth century, the Ajanta murals in particular had done much to bolster India's claims to an indigenous painting tradition (colonial era art historical discourse had previously suggested that India had only fostered the plastic arts, but the discovery of sites like Ajanta proved that painting had simply not survived well in the South Asian environment). As they became better-known, through expensive collections of drawings and reproductions produced with the support of the colonial administration, the Ajanta murals quickly took on an iconic status as a "classical" Indian style, one that represented a lost golden age of Indian art and society before the British (or indeed even before the Mughal) invasions. For a growing number of artists in the late colonial period, Ajanta became the premier site that one had to study in order to gain a "properly Indian" sensibility in painting. It was the classical touchstone to which one could appeal when trying to negotiate through modern artistic expressions filtered from the West, and it was the destination of choice for those enacting a South Asian version of the educational rite of passage known in Europe as the "Grand Tour." Mukul Dey undertook both of his trips to Ajanta during the particularly difficult years between his post-Nobel-Prize tour with Tagore and his own departure for England, when he was particularly struggling to establish himself as a professional artist. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that during this period it would be Ajanta that Dey would turn to in order to try to stake out and establish his artistic credentials.

Personal narrative

One of the most interesting things about the narrative of *My Pilgrimages* is that it weaves fluidly through and across the genres of travelogue, personal autobiography and historical text. Suggestions for accommodation are offered alongside historical sketches of the life of the Buddha and the monastic community who first built and lived in the caves. Crucially, woven throughout all of this are stories of Dey's own personal experiences of traveling to and living at the caves while he undertook the months-long project of producing painted copies of the murals on paper. Dey recounts his "adventures pleasant and otherwise," including accounts of his travel across India by train, his encounters with wild animals, and the unfortunate death of his servant from cholera. In one chapter, for example, he begins by presenting a series of catalogue-like descriptions of the various caves with standardized information on their chronologies and decorations. He then suddenly breaks away from this inventory to tell a story about some mischievous monkeys who harassed him while he was trying to work. As the anecdote unfolds, Dey follows the monkeys some distance into the jungle where he discovers a set of enormous stone elephants. He then explains in the text that these sculptures were seen and discussed by the seventh century Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang, thus bringing his own personal anecdotal detour back full circle to the story of Ajanta, its connections

... in times of great social change, people were compelled to write their own stories not because they were exemplary, but because they in some way represented a remarkably new kind of life that even a few years previously would have been unthinkable.

to ancient routes of pilgrimage, and the history of Buddhism in India. This is simply one example of a pattern that recurs throughout *My Pilgrimages*; everywhere in this text Dey's own personal narrative is inexorably bound up with and within his telling of the story of Ajanta itself.

Scholars have noted that other Indian autobiographies written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often tended to veer away from the exploration of individual personality and psychology, in favor of connecting the individual life to larger political and historical trends and developments. In the Bengali context, Partha Chatterjee has noted that this manifested as a tendency to graft one's own story onto the story of India itself, suggesting that at this time the new, modern individual could in some ways only be understood "by inscribing it in the narrative of the nation."⁴ In a similar manner, Mukul Dey was able to present his own personal narrative at this time only by presenting it alongside and in relation to a national symbol of great cultural significance like the Ajanta caves. What is significant, and what distinguishes Dey's autobiography from the others discussed by Chatterjee, is the choice of a nationalistic model drawn particularly from the field of culture or art, rather than politics, on which Dey elects to graft his own personal narrative. As a visual artist, Dey was compelled to participate in and to identify with the national symbols of culture and art, and these were the tools at hand that could be used by visual artists like Dey as vehicles through which to present their own artistic identities in the autobiographical format.

Moreover, insofar as *My Pilgrimages* displays the tendency to veer away from an exploration of its author's psychology or personality, it also has this in common with the large body of artists' life-writings that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in England. These artists' life-writings differed significantly from the usual Victorian models in that, rather than being prone to introspection and spiritual revelation, artists' autobiographies tended to be extensions of their art practice, designed to attract readers (and potential buyers) through a conversational and anecdotal attitude and approach. The biographical genre was, by this time in England, an established means by which artists presented and promoted themselves as respectable working artists. And indeed, it is important to note that Mukul Dey wrote and published *My Pilgrimages* during the seven years that he spent living and working in the UK. The lack of introspection that marks many other early Bengali autobiographies may be connected, in this case at least, less to nationalist notions of the self and more to a desire for artists to promote themselves as functional and productive, fully socialized members of society.

Extensively illustrated

The illustrations in *My Pilgrimages* also serve to distinguish this text from other early Bengali autobiographies. The images are remarkable both for their variety and their sheer volume. They include numerous photographs, line drawings, and reproductions of many of the painted copies of the frescos that Dey made during his time at the caves. There are nearly one hundred images altogether, making *My Pilgrimages* the most extensively illustrated early Bengali autobiography. According to correspondence that survives between Dey and his original London publisher, it seems that he wanted even more images to be included, but he had to be hurriedly ushered into the publisher's office at the last minute to make a reduced selection. Such a strong visual presence obviously speaks to Dey's training and background as a visual artist and his accompanying tendency to contemplate the world visually; it seems only likely that visual artists like Dey who elected to enter into the textual world would do so in a manner that emphasized the role of the visual in public life. But the images also relate and contribute to Dey's ability to fashion himself as a modern Indian artist in another very concrete, material sense. Before they became illustrations for this text, these images circulated first as independent commodities; many of the copies of the Ajanta and Bagh murals, which Dey produced during his time at the caves, and which were reproduced in the text, were sold to a Mr. Kallianjee Curumsey in Bombay, before Dey sailed to England in 1920. It was in fact the sale of those paintings that provided Dey with the financial wherewithal to undertake his journey to the UK, where he was in turn able to obtain the additional training, credentials and connections necessary to successfully market himself as a modern Indian artist, both in England and upon his return to Calcutta. These images therefore did not merely reflect an already formed artistic sensibility, they actively contributed to the making of Dey's artistic identity and his ability to live and earn a living as a professional artist at that time.

New possibilities

Dey's second autobiography was titled *My Reminiscences*, and it was composed in English and self-published in 1938 while Dey was serving as principal of the Government Art School in Calcutta. *My Reminiscences* recounts Dey's childhood and early

education, includes a lengthy description of his international travels and successes, and also provides some information about his work as an artist and principal after his return to India. Sudipta Kaviraj has argued that some early Bengali autobiographies were written to present readers with the possibility of a life; in times of great social change, people were compelled to write their own stories not because they were exemplary, but because they in some way represented a remarkably new kind of life that even a few years previously would have been unthinkable.⁵ In much the same way, *My Reminiscences* presents a model of a possible life, lived as a modern, professional artist. It presents the constellation of skills and opportunities that make such a life possible, including travel, personal friendships, choice of specialization, paths of professionalization, and access to and best use of new forms of urban patronage and self-promotion.

My Reminiscences is also interesting because it was self-published. As an artist who specialized in etching and engraving specifically, Dey had privileged access to specialized printmaking equipment and the skills and training to be able to use that equipment well. Dey always maintained the printing press he had acquired in the US, and he also cultivated good working relationships with several local publishers. He made prolific use of these to produce large volumes of printed imagery and texts for his entire life. *My Reminiscences* is interesting for the ways that it participates in a much larger body of printed textual and visual material produced by Dey at this time, including personalized insignia, letterhead and logos that served to validate and reinforce Dey's authority, and his printed material as legitimate. The tools of printing and printmaking were, at this time and to those artists who could wield them, another valuable means by which to carve out a career and to promote oneself as a modern professional artist.

Finally, towards the end of his life Dey dictated the Bengali-language memoir *Amar Katha*. Although not published until after Dey's death, this text was recorded at a time when biographical accounts of several other artists who had been active in the early twentieth century were also beginning to appear in print. Panchanan Mondal's four-volume biography of Nandalal Bose, for example, appeared between 1982 and 1993, while the fictionalized biography of Ramkinkar Baij written by Samaresh Basu, *Dekhi Nai Phire*, appeared first as a series of articles in the journal *Desh* through the 1980s, before later being published in book form. Clearly at this time the late colonial period was becoming increasingly ripe for reinterpretation, and biographical texts were one of the means by which alternative interpretations and accounts could be negotiated and presented. Indeed, there was something of a biographical war being waged at this time – with the same events and the same people being presented in very different ways in different biographical accounts – as artists nearing the end of their careers sought to ensure that it would be their version of events that would acquire the status of history.

In conclusion, I hope I have demonstrated how the autobiographical writings of Mukul Dey provide powerful insight into the ways in which an Indian artist working in the metropolis of the colonial power was able to enter into the art world by building on a strong tradition of and fascination with artists' biographies in Britain, and how such an artist was able to then also reinsert himself into the Indian art world by presenting evidence of his international successes in a biographical format. At the end of the twentieth century, the tools of biography and autobiography became a final tool by which artists sought to secure their place in the art history of the period. The biographical text was an extremely useful strategy by which artists were able to both authorize and author themselves, not only through providing a means by which to introduce the artist to its public, but also by actively contributing to the formation of the "Modern Indian Artist."

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Notes

- 1 An earlier manifestation of this paper was presented at the International Congress of Bengal Studies in Delhi, March 2010. The author thanks those who were present and who offered comments and suggestions.
- 2 McKim Marriott. 1976. "Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism," in *Transaction and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behavior*. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.
- 3 Mohandas K. Gandhi. 2009 (reprint). *An Autobiography, or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. New Delhi: Crossland Books, p.xi.
- 4 Partha Chatterjee. 1993. *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p.138.
- 5 Sudipta Kaviraj. 2004. "The Invention of Private Life: a Reading of Sibnath Sastri's Autobiography," *Telling Lives in India*, David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (eds), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p.93.

Left: General view of Ajanta caves, showing caves 1 to 17. Photo by Mukul Dey, included in *My Pilgrimages to Ajanta and Bagh* (1925).

Right: Mural depicting the temptation of Buddha, Ajanta Cave 1 (6th century). Copy done by Mukul Dey, included in *My Pilgrimages to Ajanta and Bagh* (1925).

