PART III

Art and Asia: Varieties of Engagements
For Nandalal Bose (1882–1966), the art of landscape was a set of acquired symbols, which he used to challenge conventional artistic practices. An early water-colour, from 1915, shows a distilled vision of the Padma River, where in the winter the water recedes to reveal large stretches of alluvial land. (Fig. 1) Using a charcoal grey pigment, the artist paints the water in one continuous sweep, bisecting the image diagonally. The flat planes on both sides are merely suggested by the white of the paper faintly brushed with a translucent wash. The mood is one of controlled calm scarcely broken by a flock of miniscule ducks departing from the farther shore. This water-colour was based on an actual visit to the site, but it was by no means a literal record of it.¹ In this composition, nature and abstract construction coexist in a dynamic equilibrium; topographical specificity is balanced by bold formalism. Bose was among the first Indian artists to treat landscape as an independent subject. Traditionally, trees, rocks and sky – no matter how lovingly and luxuriantly portrayed – had been secondary to narrative and dramatic action. Bose’s elevation of landscape to primary status was prompted by a number of personal and historical factors, the most important being his encounter with Japanese art.

Bose’s awareness of Japanese art began when he was a student at the Government School of Art in Calcutta in the first decade of the twentieth century. The Vice Principal of the School, Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951), was famous for adapting a pictorial mode learned from two visiting Japanese artists (Yokoyama Taikan 1868–1958 and Hishida