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.  

Adrienne Fast

Mukul Dey: an autobiographically modern Indian artist

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.  

Adrienne Fast

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 during this period, including Abanindranath Tagore (1891–1939) 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 familiar with a veritable laundry-list of notable artistic figures of the day including Laurence Binyon, Marhead 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.

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...
to Ajanta and Bhop (hereafter, My Pilgrimages), which was first published in 1925 and later reprinted in 1950. The second was a posthumously 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 1955. Covering Dey to the end of his 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 Bhop, both in western India, with the stated purpose of studying and making copies of the frescoes 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 or otherwise). Dey’s personal experience of living among the Buddhist caves, and which were reproduced in the copies of the Ajanta and Bagh murals, which Dey produced during his time at the caves, and which were the tools that he had been able to use by visual artists like Dey to negotiate through modern artistic expressions filtered from the West, and it was the destination of choice for those enact- ing the temptation to interiorize and spiritualize, 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 mode by which artists presented and promoted themselves as respectable working artists. And indeed, it is surprising just how many Dey wrote and published My Pilgrimages during the years that he spent living and working in the UK. The lack of introduction that marks many other early Bengali autobiographies could be construed in this context, at least, as less to national notoriety 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 the copies of the frescoes that Dey made during his time at the caves. There are nearly one hundred images altogether, making My Pilgrimages the most visually richly 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 visuality and visuality. 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. Dey’s use of illustrations for this text, these images circulated first as independent commodities; many of the copies of the images and Bagh murals, which Dey produced during his time at the caves, which were reproduced in the text, were sold to a M. Kajalejji Carunmany 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 such a voyage to England in 1920. He was in turn able to obtain the additional training, credentials and connections necessary to successfully market himself as a modern Indian artist, and even to return to Calcutta. These images therefore did not merely reflect an already formed artistic sensibility, they actually contributed to the making of Dey’s personal 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 travel 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 auto- biographies were written to present readers with the possibility of a life; in times of professional disappointment and discomfiture, they were expected to write their own stories not because they were exemplary, but because they in some way represented a remarkably new kind of life that everyone somehow had the possibility to lead and birth the unthinkable.” In much the same way, My Reminiscences presents a model of a possible life, lived as a modern, professional artist. It also relates and contributes to Dey’s ability to fashion himself as a modern, professional artist who would be able to live and earn a living, and even to lead a life that would be able to be marketed and promoted as such.

In conclusion, I hope I have demonstrated how the autobiogra- phical writings of Mukul Dey provide powerful insights into the ways in which an Indian artist working in the metropole of the colonial power was able to enter into the art world by building on a strong tradition of affection with an artist’s biographies in British culture, and how such an artist was able to present his version of events that would acquire the status of history. 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.”

Adrienne Fast is a PhD candidate at the department of Art History, University of British Columbia (festinationexchange.ubc.ca).

Notes
1 An earlier manifestation of this paper was presented at the International Congress of Bengali Studies in Delhi, March 2010. The author thanks those who were present and who offered comments and suggestions.