

The Art of Santiniketan Masters: Sensing the Land and Life Around



BilasenduShil

Research Scholar,
Deptt.of Drawing & Painting,
University of Rajasthan,
Jaipur, Rajasthan



I. U. Khan

Associate Professor,
Deptt.of Drawing & Painting,
University of Rajasthan,
Jaipur,Rajasthan

Abstract

The relationship of an artist or any tradition of art with society, people and nature were expressed throughout in each and every era. In case of modern Indian art it had not been so spontaneous due to the suppression of indigenous culture by deliberate efforts of British rule. A great disconnect with its own heritage were; it was the time for India to regain its identity and fit it to a changed new global timeframe. The multifaceted time of early 20th century was making Indian artists muddled to choose the appropriate identity. At this juncture a set of Santiniketan artists under the visionary of Rabindranath tried to give a solution. They established their identity in individualistic manner but under a common ethos of living true to the land and life around them.

Keywords: Physical and Cultural connection of an Artist, Art and Society, Santiniketan and Modernism of Indian Art, Art and Surrounding, Santiniketan School

Introduction

The masters, Nandalal Bose, Benodbehari Mukherjee, Ramkinkar Baiz, who pursued a common dream under the mentorship of Rabindranath Tagore. The dream was to create a space for the revitalization of art practice and for the resurgence of roots of Indian art tradition. The dream of this space was actually an art school Kala-Bhavana at Tagore's abode of peace Santiniketan. But it was not to train its pupils in specialized skills of any kind, but to cultivate sensibilities and empathy in them. It was become a teaching-learning platform in an environment where practitioners would find a scope to interact with different cultures and environment in local and global periphery as the prime motto of Santiniketan does. The artist with the understanding of individualistic practice of modern concept, amidst the respective specification on the new art- to be truly Indian- it had to be religious, mythological, linear, lyrical, symbolic, hieratical-got an aspiration to be true to the self and free in imagination. In this context the works of Santiniketan masters Nandalal Bose, Benodbehari Mukherjee, Ramkinkar Baiz and Tagore himself had truly made that ethos lively in their practice and teaching. The works of these three artists, however different from each other shows a sense of connection with the physical and cultural facts of their immediate environment. These physical facts like climate, people, landscape, flora and fauna have been explored in their individualistic way and experience of life as does in case of cultural facts like behavior, technique and human environment.

As a student of Abanindra Nath Tagore, Nandalal was taking art as the norms set by the Bengal School where theme was the history and acted as the tradition. But the encounter with Rabindranath Tagore made him realize the exact purpose of making art, requirement of the time and the nation as well. Now he had a new set of vocabulary where he gradually showed his empathy about the nature, people and tradition. His full-bloomed play is visible in the poster panels of Haripura Congress Conference where he has played with everyday village life, people, and activities as subject with simple and easily comprehensible forms in a very traditional folk art format. It was reflected as the real of contemporary rural India. He copied folk objects and took it to a different plain in terms of language. In thousands of his drawings, most brilliantly has the sense of local and empathy of with nature is expressed. He saw preservation of tradition as a part of the Indian national struggle for freedom and wanted to keep alive the priceless methods and techniques that had contributed to forming the distinct personality of the country's visual tradition. As Nandalal tried to implement Rabindranath's dreams of a closer interaction of art with nature, rural craft and everyday life, the new art training at Kala Bhavan

came to be oriented towards the 'designing of functional things' and the incorporation of a rural sensibility in art.

But in case of Benodbehari, he looks at the nature with a slightly different lens. His initial landscapes were brooding and somber in colour. But gradually he also opened himself to the joyful aspects of the nature. He used far eastern horizontal scroll format very often to paint the flat, unending stretch of land there. His Boys' hostel ceiling mural is an encyclopedic depiction of local village with a comprehensive detail depiction of individual image of creatures and plants. He probably adapted some of the elements from Japanese art. His most ambitious work inside Hindi Bhavana "The Medieval Saints" spreads over three large walls, 8 feet in height and 80 feet in length altogether. It was done between 1946 and 47, at the background of communal strikes on the verge of independence. He was depicting a synoptic view of Indian culture and capture like procession of life. It is arguably the single most important work done by a modern painter in India.

We can see the same ethos in the practice of Ramkinkar Baiz, who specially reacted to the essence and the people around him. In his sculptures he was giving a monumental value to the local life. This is a first art that does so in India; modern Indian art that giving prominence the local life and local people. Like everyone else he responded the beautiful nature around him. His monumental masterpieces like 'Sujata' in the eucalyptus groves, which is often plays in camouflage due to its tall organic sensation; "the Santhal Family", made with bamboo, laterite and concrete in rough and earthy finish set the life into the sculptures which is beyond mortality. His other works like "Mill Call", 'Thrasher' is also expressed the vitality of rural life of Santiniketan. Ramkinkar's passion is also visible in his expressive and quick ink and watercolour paintings, mingled in same subject of local people and nature.

Now, in Tagore's own case, the arts of Asia played a big role. Shaping the formal aspects of Santiniketan, he believed that a free cultural contact and communication was important to the growth of culture and creativity. And this was something he thought that the modern period offered us. By seeing his paintings it is very clear that his own practice had mingled with the similar ideas but with a vastness of the material world and supreme universe as it has echoed in his literature, music and theater throughout his life. He however paved a fresh way for all other artists in India, a tribute of Acharya Nandalal, "...if Rabindranath seems rough and destructive it is because he is breaking the ground anew for us that our future flower may be more surely assured their sap" is the affirmation of Tagore's influence.

It is now broadly argued that many of the works in Santiniketan Masters are quite unique and many of them are notable enough to be considered as major benchmarks of modern Indian art. The close association with Rabindranath Tagore, Ananda Coomarswamy and Okakura Kakuzo and the

familiarity with the views of William Morris and other such people at Santiniketan led these leaders of cultural renaissance to view all the arts and crafts as a single connected panorama. They wanted to see art as part of daily life and also wanted to create a platform where practitioners would primarily understand and value the traditional methods of expressions in everyday life of common people and their simple techniques.

Under the leadership of Nandalal and the mentorship of widely resourceful Tagore they created the path to empathize how our villagers transformed their mud huts quite radically with linear graffiti on floors and walls, using mundane materials and with local subject, images and incidents. They realized that one really needed very little to express oneself on to alter an environment. The murals, paintings, drawings, sculptures done by these masters at Santiniketan still carry that ethos. K. G. Subramaniyan, the perfect predecessor of these masters had rightly said in a discussion on the works of his masters as with the selfless efforts of initial masters majorly Nandalal Bose, Benodbehari and Ramkinkar under the ideological focus of Tagore consequently developed a "sense of identity" based on "sense of place".

Objective of the Study

The key intention of the present study is to explore the artistic contribution of early 20th century modern Indian artists of Santiniketan in terms of their physical and cultural contacts to articulate an identity as individual artists and as a nation as well in the periphery of global urge of time and edifying the importance of local inheritance.

Conclusion

With the vision of Tagore and efforts of these extraordinarily diverse artists under the single ethos of living in and making connection with the climate, people, human environment, landscape, flora and fauna brought a bold, new language that grew out of the native soil of Santiniketan. It is these artists who uttered a meaning of individuality and answered the question of identity which to fit into a changed new global timeframe with the pride of local inheritance of culture and people.

Plate 1: New Clouds by Nandalal Bose, 1937, Coll: NGMA



Plate 2: Posters By Nandala Bose for Haripura Congress, 1938, Coll: NGMA



Plate 3: Tree Lover by Benodbehari Mukherjee, Tempera on Paper, 1932, Coll: NGMA



Plate 4: Shor Bon by Benodbehari Mukherjee, Tempera on Paper, 1938, Coll: Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan



Plate 5: Village Scene by Benodbehari, Egg Tempera, Kala Bhavana Boys Hostel, Santiniketan



Plate 6: Farmers Harvesting by Ramkinkar Baiz, Watercolour and Ink on Paper, 1943



Plate 7: Untitled by Ramkinkar Baiz, Watercolour and Ink on Paper, 1950

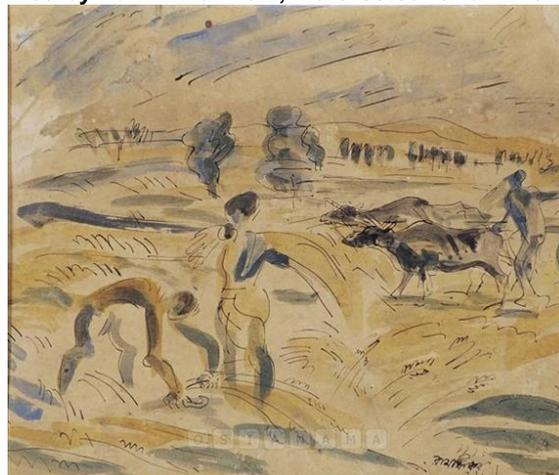


Plate 8: Mill Call by Ramkinkar Baiz, Outdoor Sculpture, Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan

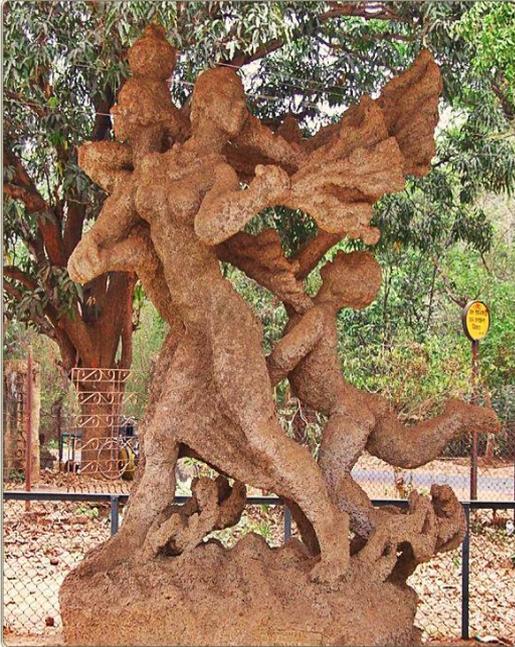


Plate 9: Sujata by Ramkinkar Baiz, Outdoor Sculpture, Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan



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