

Nandalal's Murals In Context of Tagore's Educational Experiment at Santiniketan

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Abstract

Santiniketan remained a pivotal centre of new art image and language in Indian contemporary art. The artist at Santiniketan took various art challenges to compete with the new emerging art trends and make unique identity and place of Indian art at international level. Mural making was thus the part of educational ideology envisioned by Rabindranath, where he aimed at revival of the lost medieval Indian art of mural tradition as well an aim to learn through nature and culture. Artist like Nandalal Bose, Benodbehari, Suren Kar contribute a lot to the mural experiment. The artist explored technical style from Indian folk to European style. To make murals thus Jaipuri fresco style, Italian fresco style technique remained a new challenge for the artists. Mural making was an effort to make art accessible to the larger public and keep the continuity with the Indian cultural art heritage.

Key words: *Mural, traditional, new language, style and educational experiment.*

Introduction

Each artistic experiment and educational ideology at Santi Niketan are it related to outdoor sculpture or Indore painting or mural making has always been an effort to create a new language in art. Santi Niketan since establishing as an art centre in 1921 has always radiated with new art challenges and experimentation. Experimentation in mural making became one of the prime activities in Kala Bhavana. The reason to take up this challenge aroused, as the rich heritage of our mural making after medieval period had significantly declined. The richness of mural art tradition that was once seen at Ajanta or Tanjavur or in Forts of Rajasthan was almost lost and whatever remained in fragments and preserved was losing its color, texture, style and subject matter with time. The aim of Santi Niketan artist thus at such point of decline was to rebuild and revive the mural cultural heritage of Indian art, along with new artistic meaning and narration. To give a new impetus and dimension to mural art, artist at Kala Bhavana took references from traditional, folk and classical art to develop the great mural visual vocabulary. The new language was experimentation with stylistic assimilation, new and traditional methods of technique employed in mural making.

Nandalal Bose, who was called by Rabindranath Tagore to Kala Bhavana, gave new sensibility to mural painting. During 1909, he joined Lady Herringham who was in India to study Indian art as well working on Ajanta murals. He learned under her for three months that had a lasting influence on his future work. The experience enriched his vision of perspective, style, unity, coherence and harmony needed to spiritualize the space and meaning of narration in mural painting. He also learnt the space distribution and structural organization of forms and composition to lend aesthetical symmetry to mural reading. According to his daughter Gauri Bhanja, Nandalal experimented with mural technique and did a few paintings on the wall of their house in Calcutta after returning from Ajanta.

Mural learning and making was a part of Tagore's educational reformation. Rabindranath educational experiment at Santi Niketan was more emphasized on learning and developing social sense from culture, Philosophy and nature. He was much inspired by the Eastern philosophy and Vedanta philosophy. In the context of educational ideology mural experimentation was a progress to bring art and culture to the public domain. Tagore thinking and emphasize on learning from nature was inspired by the European movement of naturalism. Socrates defining naturalism in art is "the quality of seeming alive has the

strongest visual appeal". When artist Nandalal Bose was taking stylistic inspiration from Ajanta he was not imitating the art, but was incorporating the images and proportion that were beautiful in proportion and appearance. Nature learning or learning from nature in term of art and Tagore ideology thus should be understood as the creative power of artist who selected the themes and subject that present the significant history of narrations. Nandalal like Rabindranath emphasized on creativity, he encouraged his students to work together like traditional craftsmen, an ideology similar to the Bauhaus artist.

Nandalal mural work at Dwarika executed around 1918 was his first experiment with mural at Santi Niketan. The experiment at Dwarika was not very futile due to technical limitations; the colors did not properly fix. To overcome the problem Nandalal under Haridas took the task to learn perfectly the traditional canons and technique of mural painting. He also made contact with traditional craftsmen, artist and also studied *Shilpa Shastras*. *Shilpa Sastra* accounts detailed correct procedure for the representation and proportion of figures for preparation of murals painted on walls and ceiling, floors, temples and palaces. In 1923, an elaborate decorative mural was made in 'Patha Bhavana' along with assistance of Benodbehari and his daughter Gouri Bhanja. The theme of mural was inspired by the early Buddhist art, consisting of motifs such as fishes, birds, water bird, animals, fruits and flowers. The colours used are combination of coal, chalk, yellow, Indian red ochre mixed with rice starch. The theme and subject style of this mural became inspiration to Nandalal Bose, who in his later murals at Santoshalaya along with Benodbehari depicted the elements and motifs from Santhal village hut, depicted social mundane life of Santhal's. The convention in murals depicting Santhal's life is meant to depict the realistic scene moving in time and space.

Experiment with different techniques remained an ongoing part of Santi Niketan mural making challenge. At Santi Niketan artist like Nandalal, Benodbehari Mukherjee, Surendra Nath kar, Suren Kar also practiced the technique of Jaipur mural painting under Narshinglal. Narshinglal was called to Shanti Niketan in 1927 and again in year 1933. The major influence of Jaipuri style mural were seen in the themes at Patha Bhavana depicting Vaitalik by Surendra Nath Kar, Vasanto Utsav by Nandalal Bose. Each panel and sequence of narration stylistically resembled Indian miniature painting from Rajasthan region. The visual panoramic view of these murals displays a rich air of festival participation, a rich sense of spatial illusion, dynamic action and naturalistic placement of figures. The color

scheme also remained vital element to harmonize the events mood. The use of flat color remained a distinct characteristic in these murals. Visually the scene moves like individual episode as characteristic of scroll painting.

Tagore was deeply inspired by the folk tradition and folk philosophies, and was convinced that these traditions should be part of education for self-understanding of culture. Tagore dialogue with rural Bengal began in 1890 when his father sent him to Shelidah to look after their ancestral village. He was influenced by the music of *Bauls* which had a profound influence on his life. Santi Niketan educational ideology thus can be best described as 'patriotic conservation'. Tagore family since 1870's also ran 'Hindu society' which organized *melas* (village fair) where village handicrafts were displayed with the help of Hindu and Muslim communities. These past visions of idyllic rural harmony, became an ideological vision for his Santi Niketan too. Therefore, when one looks at each mural one should not only limit their understanding to mere depiction of episodes and decorative walls. Each elemental is a narration of his vision towards the place of music, poetry, festival celebration, natural landscapes in a wider context of self-determination and learning from culture and environment. All such depictions were transformed into pictorial language to cut caste division, religious conflicts and respect for all culture and human kind. The murals subject at Santi Niketan reflects Tagore's ideology of integrated living in harmony with nature.

Mural making in 'Italian Process' also remained one of the successful experimentations at Santi Niketan. *Shyama* dance drama which now lost and undocumented and Nandalal *Halakrishana* were two murals executed using Italian fresco technique. Later murals like *Khoai*, *Natir Puja*, *Chaitanya Birth*, *Shapmochan* are more classical and refined work of murals in Shanti Niketan Patha Bhavana building. *Natir Puja* is a vertical panel based on Rabindranath's play. The panel depicts the events from the drama in moment. *Halakarshan* from 1928 is themed around Rabindranath as ploughman, Vidusekhar Sastri as priest and a group of women and children bearing offering. Each figure is in middle away from the base line giving the effect of continues moving feet's and bodies engaged in dance and movement. The stance of each figure is in harmony with the musicians on the left right side. The panels of later phase are more linear in style, calligraphic similar to Pre-Renaissance period. Italians favored pure profiles in their mural making, imitate nature and *nature* (the created world) and *nature naturals*' (the creative force

behind it). The back ground elements such as landscape, decorative motifs thus should be considered as *nature* and music, composers on behind giving rhythm to dance sequence as *nature naturans*.

Nandalal pictorial language is poetical in nature, his selection and careful scrutiny of each episode for theme is lyrical like *nacarat* (*Shehnai* performance) the expression of each figure and motif is not artificial. What is remarkable about mural is also the manner in which the artist lets himself loose, set himself free of all early conventions and makes a new harmonic language.

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PICTURES



(MEDIVAL SAINTS BY BENODBEHARI MUKHERJEE)



(MEDIVAL SAINTS BY BENODBEHARI MUKHERJEE)



(DETAIL OF NATIR PUJA BY NANDALAL BOSE)



(DETAIL OF NATIR PUJA BY NANDALAL BOSE)