

CONTRIBUTION OF PAINTER NANDALAL BOSE TO INDIAN CONTEMPORARY ART

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Abstract

The Contemporary Art period means that art which is currently associated with a particular movement. The changes that have taken place in Indian art have taken art to a new aspect in today's time. His social values, thinking, actions, behavior etc. everything has changed. Contemporary artists liberated themselves by assimilating the nature of the object through the inner eyes. Now he no longer imitates nature nor does he have any attachment to the likeness of the object. Nature becomes the object of the artist's experience, the swelling of the shape by the basic elements of the object is the basic compositional method of contemporary art. It is very important to maintain balance in their density, emptiness and speed. Contemporary artists are so impatient to identify themselves that they do not want to compromise with any environment. This is the reason why extraordinary creators are born in the field of contemporary art." Nandalal Bose (1882-1966) popularly known as the Master Moshai, was a disciple of Abanindranath Tagore. Nandalal was fascinated by the potential of folk art and indigenous modes of expression and inculcated them in his works although stylising them in a unique representation for depiction and narration of local life. He began his artistic career in the fervour of the Swadeshi movement, rejecting western colonial norms of art and taking inspiration from the ancient murals of Ajanta and Bagh caves as well as Mughal miniatures. In 1919, Nandalal Bose accepted Rabindranath Tagore's invitation to become the Principal of the art school Kala Bhavan at Visvabharati University in Santiniketan. He also painted a series of posters for the Indian National Congress at Haripura in February 1938.

Keywords

Contemporary Art, nandalal bose, tagore, painting, Mahatma Gandhi, etc.

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Nandalal Bose, the doyen of modern Indian art and champion of nationalism through art is undoubtedly one of the best artists ever in the history of India. Bose was born to a Bengali family residing in Haveli Kharagpur which was in the Bengal presidency of British India (now in Munger district, Bihar) on 3rd December 1882. The artist in Bose grew by modelling images and decorating pandals for pujas. After a failed attempt to pursue commerce upon his family's insistence, Bose eventually left the field and joined the Calcutta School of Art. The years he spent at the art school and later at Shantiniketan shaped him into a maestro of Indian art and a defender of Indian culture in times when it was subjected to a lack of aesthetics by the British and West painters. The most important inspiration in the career of Bose as a painter came from his teacher who is also one of the most genius painters of all time, Abanindranth Tagore and his colleagues who later came to be known as the painters of the 'Bengal School of Art'.



The Bengal School of Art holds an important part in the national movement. The beginning of this new movement in Indian art coincided with the Swadeshi movement. Tagore and his friend, E B Havell, the principal of the Calcutta School Art believed in creating a new style of distinctively 'Indian' art against the colonial art schools which were imposing European taste on Indian students and demeaning the legacy of Indian art. Tagore and Havell designed a curriculum that cultivates Indian themes and techniques. According to Partha Mitter, the famous art historian, Tagore and his first-generation students were engaged in "recovering the lost language of Indian art". Abanidranath Tagore thus pioneered Swadeshi ideals in the arena of Indian art. The Bengal school rejected the ennoblement of British acts and highlighted the grandeur, aesthetics and beauty of Indian styles such as the Mughal, Rajput, Pahari etc. Nandalal Bose, along with Surendranath Gangoly, was the first pupil of Tagore, with whom he revolutionized the content, perspective and techniques of Indian art.

Though Bose was deeply inspired by Tagore and wanted to learn from him, he was hesitant at first to approach the latter. However, seeing the marvellous art created by Bose, Tagore readily accepted him as his student. Bose broke the tradition of following Western idiom in art by adopting diverse styles, themes and methods. Though he experimented with European techniques also, the core of his paintings remained 'Indian'. Bose brought to canvas the day-to-day lives of Indians. Despite

being sophisticated in terms of techniques, the simplicity and relatability of his subjects made him a popular name. The murals at Ajanta caves were the primary artistic inspiration for Nandalal Bose. In the early phase of his career, he spent months in Ajanta copying and studying the murals, whose influence is very well evident in his later works, especially in the Indian constitution. Bose had a keen and sharp vision with which he noticed and brought to canvas, the essence of Indian culture from everywhere he travelled. From the early years of his career under Abanindranath Tagore, which incidentally was the period of the Swadeshi phase of the Indian freedom movement, Bose was drawn to the national movement. His direct involvement in the struggle,



however, began in 1930 with the iconic linocut print of Mahatma Gandhi. Bose was deeply moved by the courage and determination of Gandhiji who defied the salt law at Dandi on 12th March 1930. Inspired by the photographs published in the newspapers Bose created a linocut print of Gandhi, within six days of the march, and he entitled it, 'Bapuji'. The print portrays Gandhiji in his dhoti and chadar with a walking stick in the right hand and his right foot forward. Portraying Gandhiji in white lines against the black background, reflected his struggle and the urge for redemption. The artwork reflected the sheer strong will and unshakable courage of Mahatma Gandhi on his way to attaining Poorna Swaraj. 'Bapuji' became one of the most popular pictures of the time and penetrated households nationwide.



In his *Vision and Creation* published in 1940, Bose devotes an entire essay to Mahatma Gandhi, which is explicit proof of the monumental amount of inspiration

Gandhiji exerted on him as well as the deep admiration and respect Bose had for Bapu. In the essay titled “Bapuji”, Bose calls him the ‘patron of artists’. He urges the Indian artists to transform themselves by following Mahatma Gandhi’s creativity which finds expression in his attempt of transforming his own self from a man to a divine being if they want. He also stressed the necessity of having a strong character for an artist without which the art produced lacks “force or foundation”. Though Bose created the linocut ‘Bapuji’ in 1930, he got to work with his idol personally only in the second half of the decade.

Impressed by the work of Bose, Mahatma Gandhi sought his assistance in setting up an exhibition of village crafts and Indian art at the INC meeting in Lucknow in 1935. In Moti Nagar, the temporary city erected for the session, he also painted frescos of the congress presidents in procession symbolic of the advancement towards freedom. Gandhi recruited Bose and his team soon after to craft a model village out of local materials at Khirdi, the venue of the Faizpur session of the Indian National Congress. The structure created by Bose and his students at Khirdi using local wood and Bamboo became the major attraction of the session. Writing in his Harijan, on January 2, 1937, Gandhiji ed on the work; “launched out to the villages with the eye of an artist that is his and picked up numerous things from the peasant’s household, things that never catch an ordinary eye as striking objects of art, but which his discerning eye picked up and arranged and thus clothed with a new meaning.” Among his works for Gandhiji and the national movement, the most famous of Nanadalal Bose is the ‘Haripura Posters’, which he created for the Haripura Congress of 1938. He designed more than four hundred posters out of which eighty four were painted by himself. The posters of Bose and his team adorned the main gate, pavilions and walls of the living quarters of the volunteers. The pasting of the posters in living quarters signified the politics of quotidian living as noted by Natasha Eaton in her article on nationalist art published in *The Art Bulletin* (2013).

The posters made in handmade paper stood out because of their depiction of the cross-section of Indian village life. They were displayed in wooden frames as if they were ‘s’ to the daily village life. It had subjects like musicians, carpenters, hunters, husking women, spinners and smiths along with modest scenes of village life such as cooking, animal rearing and child nursing. They reflected the Gandhian program of promoting the value of village living and the Congress vision of Swaraj. The Haripura posters created by Bose and his disciples made a statement of rejecting colonial urbanism by projecting the Indian villages and daily lives without attributes of modernism. Apart from the posters, the decorations at the session were also taken care of by Bose. He used local bamboo, thaches and khadi of different colours to

adorn every corner of the venue. Bose also took the help of local craftsmen and used the earthen pots and vessels they designed with local motifs to add much elegance to the rural atmosphere created at the session. Nandalal Bose's association with Mahatma Gandhi and his work for Congress sessions made him a household name. His nationalist vision, unmatched skills and tremendous popularity were undoubtedly the primary reasons behind the members of the Constituent Assembly approaching him to illustrate the pages of the Constitution of India. Bose recruited a group of artists who designed twenty two images depicting the rich and vast heritage and culture of India. They were painted in the manuscript



of the Indian Constitution in chronological order using gold leaf and stone colours through indigenous methods. Upon the request of Jawaharlal Nehru, Nandalal Bose went on to design the emblems of the awards given by the Government of India, including Padma Sri and Bharat Ratna. From 1921 onwards, Bose served as the principal of the Kala Bhavana at Shantiniketan which was a part of Rabindranath Tagore's Visva-Bharati University. The Kala Bhavana was the manifestation of Tagore's vision of "an indigenous attempt at adapting modern methods of education in a truly Indian cultural environment. The institution marked the culmination of the nationalistic and modern expression of Indian art pioneered by the Bengal School of Art. In a letter he wrote to Abanindranath Tagore, Rabindranath expressed his hope of germination and lasting of the "seed sown" by the former through Kala Bhavan. Under Nandalal Bose, the institution grew rapidly. The Kala Bhavan team was the backbone of Bose's work for the INC sessions and the Indian Constitution.

Nandalal Bose passed away on April 16, 1966, at his favourite place, Shantiniketan. Though he left the world, his legacy remained solid. His students Benode Behari Mukherjee, K G Subramanyan, Pratima Thakur, Satyajit Ray, and Ramkinkar Bajaj among others went on to become the torchbearers of Indian culture on various fronts. Seven thousand artworks of Bose including the linocut 'Bapuji' is preserved and exhibited at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. Apart from the few in the NGMA collection, the rest of the Haripura Posters are now at the Tribal Museum of the Gujarat Vidyapith. As the art historian R Siva Kumar noted; Bose's work is yet to be completely grasped even in India!

Conclusion

Nandalal Bose was an amazing artist known for his incredible contributions to the Bengal School of Art. His paintings beautifully depict Indian mythology and rural life. One of his notable works is “Bharat Mata,” which portrays Mother India as a powerful figure. Another famous painting is “Krishna and Radha,” capturing the divine love between Lord Krishna and Radha. “The Lady with the Lamp” showcases the compassionate spirit of Florence Nightingale, and “Mahatma Gandhi” portrays the iconic leader of India’s independence movement. These artworks truly reflect Bose’s deep connection to Indian culture.

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