

THE WEEK @
30

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THE WEEK

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FOOD

DECODING THE BIRYANI



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SUPPORTING ACT

Vivekananda inspired many ways of reforming and articulating Indian art

BY SAMIT DAS



SWAMI Vivekananda's contribution to Indian art has been little known because he was not a regular painter or a professionally trained artist. Nor did he teach anybody. His transcending thoughts on Indian art and the articulation of it was strongly encouraged by many of his friends, disciples and other scholars, such



SWAMI GAMBHIRANANDA/UDBHODHAN KARYALAYA

SPIRITUAL CALL:

A young Vivekananda

as Sister Nivedita, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, E.B. Havell, Kakuzo Okakura, Ranada Prasad Gupta and Priyonath Singha. All his concepts have been applied by Nandalal Bose, one of the leading artists of modern India.

Vivekananda's life was inseparable from his evolving response to the social conditions in India and the west. The tension between the two also became a source of his own internal division. History began to disturb him increasingly. He gave expression to this in numerous letters to his friends and disciples from different cultural backgrounds. Sister Nivedita, who truly understood his mission, helped him take his efforts forward. His transcendence at this level was part of a bigger effort to take the human soul beyond history and back to its connection with its roots.

Though India had been ruled by many over different historical periods, the essence of its primary cultural flow was never extinguished. During the late 19th century there was tremendous pressure on culture. This left a sediment as it was distilled through narrowing passages. The

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country was beset by innumerable norms and ideas, many of which it adopted.

During this time, Vivekananda raised the idea of the endurance of Indian culture, recognising the essence of religion and culture. In his discourse he stated his demands, not just using religion, but through India's ancient art and sciences, which he came to know by travelling in the country and abroad. He approached India as a whole, in its totality.

For the majority, his discourses were delivered during personal discussions and in letters to his friends and disciples. Seeking a vision of India as a whole, Sister Nivedita redefined his words and infused a lot of his thoughts into the art movement in India those times. The thoughts and beliefs she expressed were largely put into practice by Nandalal Bose. In her efforts to spread Vivekananda's vision, Sister Nivedita was supported by Okakura, Havell and Coomaraswamy, with Vivekananda's dialectical viewpoint as their source of inspiration.

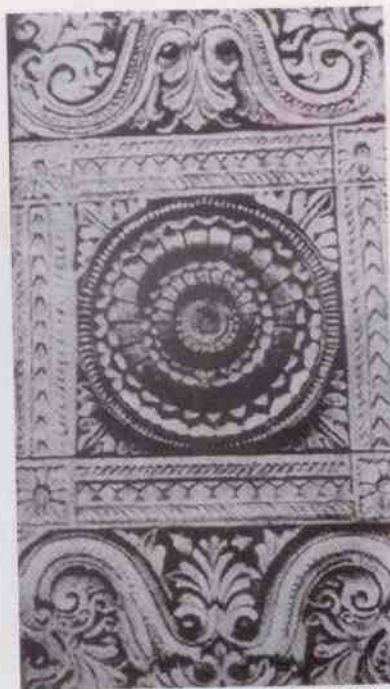
Some of the clear stands Vivekananda adopted regarding art are:

- ◆ Indian art has culminated through its essential form rather than the physical material form.
- ◆ The strength of Indian art is symbol and latent energy, but, at the same time, the profusion of symbolic representation has created some misapprehensions.
- ◆ Ornamentation cannot be mere representation of shapes and forms; it has to be an integral part of daily life.
- ◆ Hindu art is an integral facet of Indian civilisation; despite some external influences, its essence has remained unaffected.
- ◆ Indian art is not just Hindu art; it includes Mughal art. The la

LASTING IMPRESSION: A wood carving in West Bengal, which Vivekananda used to emphasise the importance of local art forms

ter is not just Islamic art that was brought from outside and it has had a tremendous effect on the New Bengal school art movement. This is clearly visible in Jorasanko House in Kolkata, where Abanindranath and Gaganendranath had a huge art collection (known as the Tagore Collection), in which Mughal art and Mughal style were far more present than elsewhere.

Although in earlier times Indian art was essentially patronised by royal families, its proximity to the common man was visible. One of the reasons for India's taking pride in its art lies in the beauty it brings to everyday life. As Okakura put it: "The simple life of Asia need fear no shaming from the sharp contrast with Europe in which steam and electricity have placed it today. The old world of trade, the world of the craftsman and the pedlar, of the village market and the saints'-day fair, where little boats row up and down... it is a nexus of habits and associations, of human elements and traditions, suffused with the tenderness and friendship of one who has shared, if only for a moment, the joys and sorrows of its personal drama. These things are the secret energy of the thought, the science, the poetry and art of Asia. Torn from their tradition, India, made barren of that religious life which is the



NIVEDITA LORKMATA BY SHANKARI PRASAD BASU, ANANDA PUBLISHERS 2010

essence of her nationality."

Vivekananda's influence on Indian art might have been seen as an indirect one, but that in no way detracts from the extraordinary impact he had. Few documents are available and as we know, he never directly contributed to training any artist. We can, however, firmly say that he was the sage of that time, who inspired many ways of reforming and articulating Indian art.

In the early 19th century there was no art criticism or analysis of art work in India. Indian art was only concerned with antiquity, maintaining it in a position subordinate to

Greek sculpture. Rajendralal Mitra was the first to make a declaration in favour of Indian art, followed later by Akshay Kumar Moitra and then by Vivekananda.

His endeavour was to infuse spiritual strength into the lyrics sung by devotees—the sage's philosophy and the prayers of the common people. Swamiji had given form and expression to the enduring integrity present in this country and brought it to a wider level of understanding.

Tagore House

Vivekananda had deep connections with the Tagore House in Kolkata. It was his proximity to Maharshi Debendranath that had inspired Vivekananda's affinity for *dhyana*. From 1879 onwards Vivekananda was involved in the Brahma Samaj movement. He had a deep respect for classical music and went on to compile a book on classical music, in which he included ten songs by Rabindranath Tagore and a collection of Brahma songs.

Vivekananda was deeply interested in Japan. He wrote to Sister Nivedita: "There are many things we need to learn from Japan. They have successfully integrated utility and art. We must make a connectivity with Japan." Japanese art was the basis of the mutual respect between Vivekananda and Okakura. According to Swamiji, in Asian civilisation, art and life are integrated, something specific to this part of the world.

Nandalal Bose's art

There was a time when Indian art was never the object of discussion as an art form beyond crafts. Many scholars, including John Ruskin, were unable to conceptualise the form of Indian art in its totality. Thanks to Rajendralal Mitra and his

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Kali the Mother

Rendered into modern English by Sudeep Sen

Stars blotted out/clouds shielding clouds/darkness
vibrant, resonant/In the roaring wind, souls of a mil-
lion lunatics freed from prison/wrench out tree-roots,
sweep all in their path. Sea too joins the fray, wave-

mountains reach the pitch-black
sky. Flashes of lurid light reveal
everything/a thousand shades
of grimy-black death scatter
plague, sorrow/dancing mad
with joy.

Come, Kali Ma, come/for
terror is your name, death
is in your breath, and your
every shaking step destroys
the world forever. You are
time, you are destroyer.
Come, Kali Ma, come/
who dares misery over
love, a death in the form
of hug? Dance the tandav
destruction/to him, the
Ma comes.

*The stars are blotted out,
The clouds are shielding clouds,
In the roaring wind, souls of a million
lunatics freed from prison wrench out tree-roots,
sweep all in their path. Sea too joins the fray,
wave-mountains reach the pitch-black sky.
Flashes of lurid light reveal everything,
a thousand shades of grimy-black death scatter
plague, sorrow, dancing mad with joy.
Come, Kali Ma, come, for terror is your name,
death is in your breath, and your every shaking
step destroys the world forever. You are time,
you are destroyer. Come, Kali Ma, come, who
dares misery over love, a death in the form of
hug? Dance the tandav destruction to him, the
Ma comes.*

The original poem in Swami's own hand,
written on a houseboat on the Dal Lake
after visiting the Kshir Bhavani Temple.

dedicated research, Indian art began to be articulated. Previously, Greek art had been considered the ultimate expression of classical art and Indian art was measured against it. In 1900, Vivekananda opposed this idea in a religious conference. He scientifically described the specific appearance

and presence of Buddha sculptures in India.

Vivekananda's experience was a grassroots one, a direct interaction with Indian art during his barefoot travels throughout the country. Priyonath Singha, an artist and one of Vivekananda's devoted disciples,

shared many of Swamiji's thoughts with his classmate Nandalal. Later, Sister Nivedita, Havell and Coomaraswamy took Nandalal's knowledge of Vivekananda further. Nandalal's two major essays on art—*Shilpa Sadhana* and *Shilpa Prasanga*—were written while he was in discussions with the sanyasis of the Ramakrishna Mission.

Once Sister Nivedita asked Nandalal to paint Vivekananda's 'Kali', which expressed his feelings towards and words about the goddess. She was instrumental in helping Nandalal to come to a deep realisation of Vivekananda's philosophy through his artistic creation. The philosophical underpinnings of Nandalal's work can be understood through a study of the ideas propounded by a circle of luminaries who congregated in Kolkata during his formative years as an artist.

At that time Margaret Noble (who went on to become Sister Nivedita) and Vivekananda were tirelessly advocating a resurgence of spirituality in Indian art. Among this group of thinkers were Okakura and Coomaraswamy. During Okakura's visit to India he brought with him an awareness of the arts of East Asia and fostered an engagement with the traditionalist movements that arose in the face of Japan's rapid westernisation during the Meiji period.

Vivekananda and his philosophy as a whole still need to be discovered and redefined. Otherwise he may be misinterpreted by generations and we will never understand his effort of refinement and energy to look back to our own roots. Probably the time has come to rethink the term 'globalism' in the context of Indian history. Otherwise we might lose our diverse culture and identity.

Samit Das specialises in painting photography and interactive art works.









Three small white informational cards are placed vertically next to the large photograph of the decorative archway.



A small white informational card is placed below the photograph of the two people.





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