



REGISTERING HISTORY DURING PRE- AND POST-INDEPENDENCE YEARS OF INDIA THROUGH SCULPTURAL EXPRESSION.

Nitin Dutt

Assistant Professor, Department of Plastic Arts

Faculty of Visual Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi - 221005

Abstract

The paper aims to document the historic events of the immediate years before and after India attained its freedom in 1947, as perceived by Indian sculptors of that period. The subject matters adopted by these sculptors were directly or indirectly influenced by the political environment of the times discussed. While some of the sculptors and their work discussed in this paper revolves around the general idea of freedom, while others chose to portray the sentiment of nationalism, patriotism, and nation building. The independence of India was earned at a cost. The partition of India left an everlasting and traumatic impression on many of the sculptors who were displaced. The paper also highlights how as compared to painting, reflection of the historical events that predate and follow the independence of India through sculptural expression is relatively less.

Keywords: Nationalism, Independence, Partition, Expression, Sculpture.

Indian art in the twentieth century almost matches the nation's quest in adopting novel approaches and modernity. Various branches of visual and folk arts form the pantheon of what we perceive as Indian Art. Through the ages, the expression of making art has come a long way. Historically, Indian art tradition flourished under the political and religious patronage for most periods in its development and has assimilated many sensibilities. Exclusive treatment and specialty of expression by means of various mediums practiced in visual arts have been instrumental in maintaining the distinctive identity of Indian art. While carefully tracing the chronological developments of Indian art in the 19th and 20th century, one cannot ignore the role of educational

infrastructure, which was based on European academic model and practice. The prolonged exposure to such a system distanced some artists from our rich traditional practices in an unnatural manner. As a result, many artists embraced the Indian idiom completely and others adopted an ideology that best suited their expression and purpose.

It would be appropriate to estimate that the introduction of European academic model was a political tool adopted by British to further impede the already numb and directionless Indian sculpture since the advent of Islam in India. Indian Sculpture, which is synonymous with Indian art was systematically detached from its glorious past and roots. Some of the earliest attempts were made by Mhatre through his work *"To the Temple"* (1894), which was nothing but mere embodiment of Indian subjects in European academism. However, the earliest attempts to Indianise sculptures can be seen in V.P. Karmarkar's *"Fisher Girl"* and S. Phadke's *"Pravachan"* (1913). Undoubtedly, such attempts were still overtly western.

However, in later years, one cannot ignore the ambitious project of executing relief panels carved in the façade of New Assurance Building in Bombay in 1949, undertaken by N.G. Pansare¹. Using the local Malad stone, the relief carvings by the sculptor suggest Art Deco influences, yet the subjects and themes adopted are Indian, depicting scenes of highly stylized figures engaged in activities of manual labour. One can only estimate from such portrayal the sentiments of nation building and emerging India.

On the contrary, D.P. Roy Chowdhury's monumental and ambitious sculptures in bronze such as *"Triumph of Labour"* (1954) and *"Martyr's Memorial"* (1956) aptly capture the sentiment of nation building, nationalism and patriotism relatively later after our country attained its freedom. These outdoor sculptures are extremely realistic in their treatment of human figure; yet not significantly different from Bombay academic style. While *"Triumph of Labour"* (1954) effectively use formal elements such as movement, gesture, and grouping, yet the sculpture fails to distance itself from neo-classical sculptures. In *"Martyr's Memorial"* (1959), the sculptor commemorates the sacrifices made by common masses in the freedom struggle². This bronze sculpture of monumental proportions depicts seven figures. One of the figures leads from front shouting slogans while holding a flag. The composition depicts rest of the figures following the leader and supporting those who have fallen after being struck by bullets³.

In context of the modern Indian sculpture movement, many thinkers find the practice and works of Ram Kinker Baij as crucial, setting in motion a paradigm shift. Before Ram Kinker Baij, the practice of sculpture making can be aptly defined as post traditional⁴, entrenched in British colonial style, both in content and material. His artistic personality was shaped while growing up in a rural environment and further honed under the tutelage of Nand Lal Bose and complemented by the experience gained under the guidance of teachers trained in western traditions. Versatility of a stalwart such as Ram Kinker Baij reflected his own search that gave a new direction to

the Indian sculptural movement. More importantly, his works initiated a dialogue that brought to center stage the importance of identity and individuality in art at that time, both in regard with artist and an aspiring nation⁵. Ram Kinker Bajj predominantly used reinforced cement concrete; a fluid material that suited his temperaments, while the very medium of reinforced cement concrete became synonymous with modernism in an architectural context. His sculptures depicted the daily life events. Sculptures such as the “*Santhal Family*” (1938), “*Mill Call*” (1956), and “*Paddy Thrasher*” (1943) express the vitality of life and freedom, simultaneously depicting dignity and determination. However, Ram Kinker rarely depicted the political condition and personalities directly. One such instance can be found in his modeling of Mahatma Gandhi titled “*Dandi March*”, commemorating the significant historical event when Gandhi led people in breaking the Salt Laws⁶. In an expressionistic manner, Ram Kinker avoids the realistic portrayal of the iconic leader, appropriately matched with the broken and slashed surfaces, signifying the determination, dynamism, and resolute character of a great leader. Many years later, Ram Kinker Bajj in making the “*Yaksh*” and “*Yakhsi*” at the entrance of Reserve Bank of India premises in New Delhi, evokes forms from our rich treasure trove of traditional imagery, further pronouncing the Indianess.

Many artists reacted to the plight of freedom fighters and depicted major events of freedom struggle, using various mediums. However, one finds fewer sculptures on nationalistic themes from this period as compared to painting. One of the earliest sculptures was made by Pradosh Das Gupta. This sculpture in bronze titled “*In Bondage*” (1943), depicts a struggling figure trying to free itself from the shackles. Similarly, his other work in bronze titled “*Clamour*” (1948) showing a large group of people shouting slogans. His works from 1943 to 1948 are predominantly based on masses.

With the partition of India as a wider backdrop, many artists shifted from Lahore to New Delhi. B.C. Sanyal, Dhanraj Bhagat, and Amarnath Sehgal, chose to immortalize the tragic events of the time through their sculptures. Although predominantly a painter, Sanyal reacted to the situation and expressed with indirect and poignant metaphors. His sculpture “*Seated Woman*” (1948), a form created in terracotta exudes sorrow through its compact and self-contained form. The treatment is plain and simplistic, almost ambiguous suggesting a catastrophe that had befallen on all sections of society. One can notice similar sentiments embodied in a later work titled “*Grief*” (1959, carved in sandstone. This sculpture portrays a columnar female figure with a small opening of a veil that gives a glimpse of a grieving face.

Dhanraj Bhagat, a student of B.C. Sanyal, during the period between 1947 to 1950 worked with the themes of uprooted humanity in distress under the impact of communal violence and social neglect. Such sentiments are vented through works such as “*Terror Stricken*”, “*Reunion*”, “*Destitute*”, “*Sorrow*”, “*Affection*”, and “*Thinker*”. All these sculptures are carved in wood, Dhanraj Bhagat’s preferred medium. In “*Terror Stricken*”, made in c. 1947-48 the horror and terror caused by communal violence becomes tangible⁷. The sculpture shows two women holding a child tightly, standing frozen in time with their eyes wide open, as they face the coming

danger. In *“Reunion”* (1947) Bhagat recreates the moments of being together after a long separation caused by exodus of partition. A similar treatment is noticed in one of his later sculpture titled *“Despair”* (1952), which portrays the betrayal and tragic circumstances of post partition period.

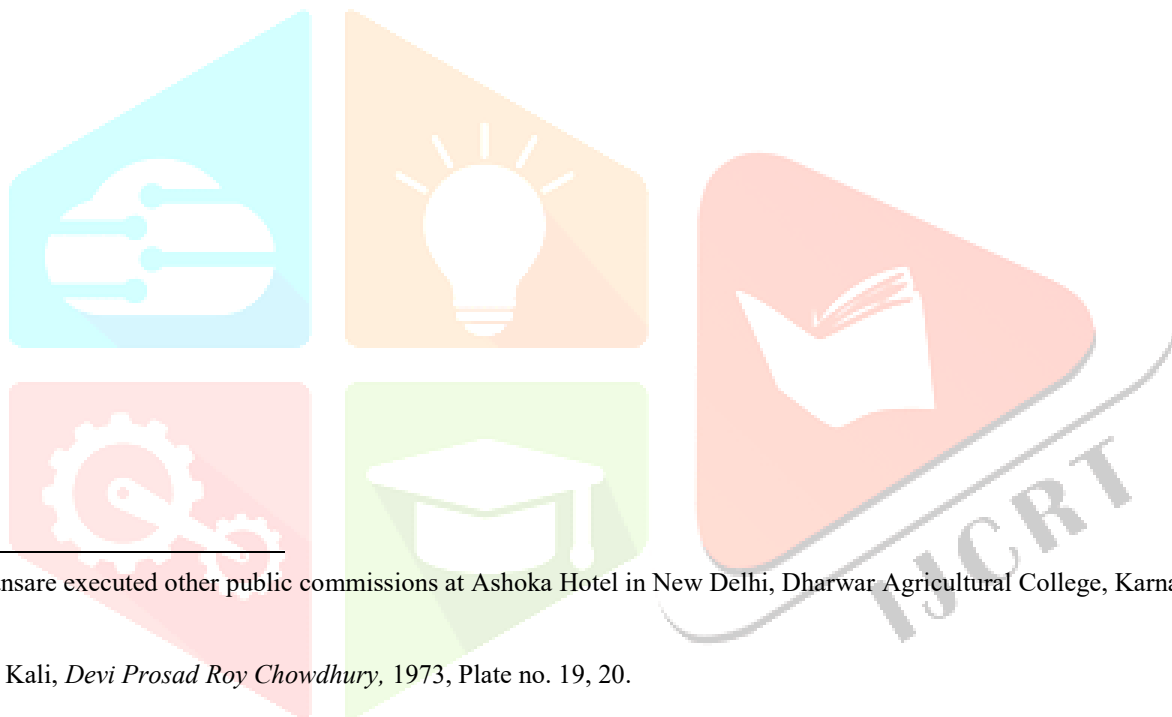
Amarnath Sehgal was also displaced from Lahore and came to New Delhi. He too witnessed the tragedies of partition⁸. His works *“Uprising”* (1957), *“Cries Unheard”* (1958), and *“Tyranny of Colonialism”* (1958), although created much later after the partition, echo Sehgal’s sentiments expressing suffering of partition and the distress and humiliation experienced under foreign rule. In *“Uprising”* (1957) and *“Tyranny of Colonialism”* (1958) groups of figures are arranged on a very low pedestal. The figures are physical separated and independent from one another, yet are unified by common cause for which they are rising together and protesting in unison. The emancipated figures, standing on reed like legs with their arms raised are expressive of passion and revolt. One can draw a similar assessment of *“Cries Unheard”* (1958).

The saga of partition and trauma of refugees can also be seen in the works of S.L. Prasher. During the early fifties Prasher made numerous sculptures in plaster and wood in a realist- expressionist manner⁹. The marked accentuation of detail and deliberate distortion of facial features in S.L. Prasher’s sculptures titled *“God Alone”* and *“Ragi”* (1958) heightens the expressive quality. These sculptures are reflective of the intense pain and suffering that the people were experiencing during that time¹⁰.

The works of the sculptors discussed in this paper document the dynamic times in Modern Indian History and nation building; years before 1947 and after. Many of these sculptors, barring only a few, were directly involved with such turbulent times. These sculptors have chosen the themes of patriotism, joys, and sorrows associated with attainment of independence and aftermath, as a point of reference in time but have also imparted their works an individualistic interpretation. One can notice these sculptors gradually progress from academic–realist style, which was suggestive of western oppression, to a new idiom that helped expressed new ideas and novel approaches.

The paper also attempts to understand the two main yet divergent thematic approach adopted by the sculptors discussed. The sculptors from Bombay, Madras, and Bengal may not have been directly involved with immediate events that resulted in India attaining freedom or the aftermath of partition. However, one cannot undermine their contribution in chronicling the sentiment of freedom as manifested in varied sculptural expression. On the other hand, the collective psyche of the sculptors who were displaced from Lahore, was burdened more by the traumatic events of partition contrary to the exalted feeling of attaining glorious independence.

One also sees a plethora of such themes well documented through the medium of painting, while one comes across a limited number of sculptures. Considering the nature of sculpture making, which is a more deliberate activity by definition as against painting which can be quick and spontaneous; sentiments of freedom, struggle, anger and anguish of the sculptors may have got diluted and thus we find few sculptures that are entrenched in such sentiments and events. Undoubtedly with our young nation and its new aspirations in setting itself progressive goals, transition of sculptural practice from recording the specific historic event to more generalized subject matter, condition of humankind, and immediate surroundings was only natural and organic.



¹ N.G. Pansare executed other public commissions at Ashoka Hotel in New Delhi, Dharwar Agricultural College, Karnataka University etc.

² Biswas, Kali, *Devi Prosad Roy Chowdhury*, 1973, Plate no. 19, 20.

³ This sculpture was installed in Patna and till date adorns the city. Another version of “Martyrs Memorial” with eleven figures by D.P. Roy Chowdhury is installed in New Delhi and is popularly known as “Gyarah Murti”.

⁴ Kumar, R. Siva, “ Ramkinker Baij and Modern Indian Sculpture” *Take on Art: Sculpture, Volume III, Issue 10*, ed. Bhawna Kakkar, New Delhi 2013

⁵ Kumar, R. Siva, “ Santiniketan: A Community of Artists and Ideas ” *Indian Art An Overview*”, ed. Gayatri Sinha, Rupa & Co., New Delhi 2003, pp. 77-79

⁶ Ram Kinker Baij made three versions of this theme in cement, plaster, and bronze. All three works are [resently in collection of N.G.M.A. Chaudhari, Sanhko, *Souvenir: Ram Kinker Vaij*, N.G.M.A., New Delhi, 1980, p.20.

⁷ Reproduced in “Vision in Art-8: Dhanraj Bhagat”, *Sunday News of India*, Oct.8, 1950.

⁸ *Cat.: Amarnath Sehgal-Selected Sculptures, Graphics and Drawings 1947-72*, N.G.M.A. New Delhi, Int. Laxmi P. Sihare, 1972, n.p.

⁹ Anand, Mulk Raj, “S.L. Prasher”, *Marg*, Vol.XVI, No. 1, p. 53.

¹⁰ S.L.Prasher stayed in a refugee camp in Delhi, immediately after the partition. Most of these works are a result of his observations and documentation of his surroundings.