

EXPOSITION

Santokhba's Priyadarshini: A Visual Biography of Indira Gandhi

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Santokhba Dudhat, the octogenarian folk artist from Gujarat, began her career as a scroll painter at the age of 65. Today, in less than a span of two decades she has drawn a 2 km. long canvas encompassing the epic themes like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to the epic personalities like Mahatma Gandhi and Indiraji. The IGNCA held an exhibition *Priyadarshini* at the Bal Bhavan. **Gautam Chatterjee** scans through the *Priyadarshini* -- a 250 mt. long canvas and evaluates the folk aesthetics of Santokhba



Santokhba took up the brush in 1977 choosing indigenous vegetable colours to create wonder canvases, today reaching a length of 2000 meters. Nascent and naive Santokhba neither had any normal education nor was she initiated into the world of art by anybody. But Santokhba drew the inspiration from her very folk tradition and chose her sacred ethos to create motifs like Ganesha and Radhakrishna. Then she depicted the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. After depicting the epic themes she took up epic personality -- Mahatma Gandhi whose birthday, they say, coincides with Santokhba's.

Santokhba's depiction of epic themes to epic personalities reaches an apex when she depicted *Priyadarshini*. She drew Indiraji on a 250 meter long scroll not only as a great personality but from a traditional societal viewpoint as well. Indiraji in the panels of Santokhba, is depicted in a simple contextual style, theme treatments being emotive and touching.

Santokhba imagined Indiraji from her own folk point of view and never reduced her work of art to a historical document, rather she demonstrated the continuing folk culture which embraces one and all. In these panels Santokhba gave priority to the towering woman as a person who viewed folk culture from within.

The scroll of Santokhba starts with *Vamsa Vriksha* or the 'Family Tree' which portrays Indiraji's generalogy down to her grandchildren. The trunk of this tree is drawn symbolically in a candle shape as if to depict the eternal light elements of the family. It is interesting to note that the peacock is seen on the tree perhaps to draw a parallel between the national bird and the family which lived for the nation.

In the next canvas Santokhba draws the ancestral house of Indiraji in the dimension of a fort closely resembling the Junagarh Fort, which is perhaps the only exposure in the life of Santokhba. The ancestral

house is bordered with green leaves which are punctuated with three petal flowers as if to symbolise the rising sun.

Santokhba never tries to give the canvas an abrupt start rather she contemplates to create a prologue. In this initial frame one can see the Mughal Court where the forefather of Indiraji, Iaxmi Narayan is shown sporting a *Gandhi Topi* and *Urdhapundra Tilak*. At the centre of the court we can see the lotus petal motif reminding one of the temple architectural heritage of India.

She also depicts the National Uprising of 1857, which is unique as it does not show a drop of blood anywhere on the canvas. When asked Santokhba quipped, "You see only bloodshed nowadays. You need not colour it." The sepoys who revolted against the British are shown dressed in traditional attire and armed with conventional weapons like swords and arrows. On the other hand, British soldiers are depicted with guns which actually helped them to crush the first Uprising.

Another interesting scene portrayed in the canvas is the marriage of Moti Lal Nehru. Here the sacred marriage is being performed near a *Homa Kunda*. On the one side of the *mandap* women are seated in a row clad in traditional attire with an over-emphasis of green. On the other side men are sitting sporting their European and Indian attire. One can observe that Moti Lalji is shown wearing a heeled *nagra* and Swarup Rani's footwear is heeled slipper. Probably, Santokhba is trying to emphasise that European style are being accepted by the family.



Santokhba draws a scene of 1901 where Motilal Nehru is delivering an open house speech with rows of people facing the speaker listening to him. People are wearing colourful headgears which symbolically suggest that they belong to different religious groups. Thus Santokhba depicts a scene of national integration.

The next important panel is the marriage scene of Jawaharlal being performed near the enflamed *Homa Kunda*. After this scene the birth of Indiraji is shown in the Santokhba's *Priyadarshini*. Child Indira is lying on the cradle being swung by Kamla Nehru. Two yellow birds are sitting atop the cradle as if lullabying the child. In the next panel little Indira is shown playing with different toys. Interestingly in one hand child Indira is shown holding a globe symbolically indicating Indira's future global role.

Santokhba also did not miss to incorporate the vital events of Indiraji's life. She depicts the scene of how in childhood days Indira Gandhi participated in the Indian freedom struggle by boycotting foreign goods. The scene depicts how little girls are throwing their precious things especially dolls into the fire as a mark of protest against foreign goods and rule. Alongside, the elders are watching the scene with awe. Another stop over of *Priyadarshini* panel is where Indiraji's grandfather Motilal Nehru is teaching her. Indiraji is sitting on the mat with rapt attention.

Child Indira Gandhi's Banar Sena or Monkey Squad is an interesting chapter of her childhood. Drawing inspiration from the Ramayana Indira created an army of children who gave a helping hand to the Independence Movement. Santokhba draws the garden setting where children are sitting and listening to Indira. In the canvas three monkeys are shown on the fence as if to symbolically make the panel relevant.

Santokhba depicts the Santiniketan setting where Indiraji is being initiated into education by Guru

Rabindranath Tagore. In this canvas Tagore is sitting on a chair amidst his students. Santokhba draws Indiraji with folded hands attired in plain yellow saree with red border suggesting the sanctity of Santiniketan.

To highlight an other occasion Indiraji is shown accompanying her ailing mother to Switzerland. This exemplifies the caring nature of daughter -- Indiraji. The first meeting of Indiraji with Feroze Gandhi is drawn in unique manner with folk fervour. Indiraji is wearing a saree covering her whole body perhaps to demonstrate traditional values of Indian women.

Santokhba even tries to trace how Indiraji was blessed by Mahatma Gandhi and Indiraji is leading her generation with a flag in her hand dressed in a white khadi saree. Using the flashback technique Indiraji is shown in the background while on the foreground the Salt Satyagraha is being led by Gandhiji. Here Santokhba attempts to depict the relevance of that era and its influence on Indiraji as well.

The marriage scene of Indira Gandhi, though a less attending gathering as shown by Santokhba nevertheless shows people from all communities attending the marriage ceremony reflected through their attire and headgears.



On the scene of participation in the freedom struggle Santokhba draws Indiraji in a protest rally holding a Tricolour Flag with the emblem of *Charkha* on it. British police is shown encircling the protesters and when Feroze Gandhi intervenes he is arrested by the Police.

Rajiv Gandhi's birth scene is another unique depiction of Santokhba. Here little Rajiv is sleeping on the cot with her mother Indira and a doctor in white apron attending the mother and child. Other visitors are shown whispering and they are drawn in simple style as if to depict the mood of the occasion. Interestingly, the wall hanging of Lord Rama's photograph is shown in a style as if the Lord is blessing the newly born. In the other panel Indiraji is shown with little Rajiv in the garden. Santokhba tries to depict the natural and environmental elements which were destined to have an impact on Rajiv Gandhi in future. Here Santokhba shows Indiraji as a loving mother being close to Santokhba's own identity. The birth of Sanjay Gandhi is also depicted in a similar fashion with slight variation of settings. And the wall hanging of Lord Rama during Rajiv's birth is replaced by the portrait of Lord Krishna. So Santokhba tries to depict Vishnu's incarnation.

Santokhba, as a folk artist, quite interestingly depicts the scene of partition of India. In this canvas, the Red Fort is drawn in the perspective of Junagarh Fort and a Tricolour is seen fluttering atop. In the foreground, the Viceroy is sitting on a round table and on it placed a divided map of India. Likewise, Santokhba depicts the architecture of Red Fort from her own perspective dealing with the subject with

modern aesthetic symbolism.

Santokhba draws Indiraji in *Priyadarshini* as a Congress Party president not depicting any gathering but in a garden full of varied flowers. Probably Santokhba symbolises the nation as myriad of varied plants, trees and flowers which Indiraji was to nurture in future as a political leader.

The Sino-Indian War finds a prominent place in the canvas of *Priyadarshini*. Santokhba draws the Indian military camps in forward bases where Indiraji used to visit boost up the morale of Indian soldiers. The canvas is filled with makeshift office of military camps where Indiraji is shown delivering a speech to soldiers who are listening with fapt attention.

Then there is the depiction of the death scene of Jawaharlal Nehru. The pyre enveloped in Tricolour is a moving scene. Santokhba in this canvas tries to highlight the impact of death on the people. She successfully translates the scenario with the tragedy of the event with halftone effect. Indiraji is shown crying before a single *Diya* (lamp).

Then ushering in the actual beginning of Indiraji's participation in active politics we find her taking oath of office in Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's cabinet. With the Indo-Pak War in 1965 Santokhba depicts Indiraji as a bed-rock which stood by the soldiers and people alike of the country. The sudden death of Lal Bahadur Shastri is signified with the slogan "Jai Jawan Jai Kisan".

A New chapter in the canvas ushers in when Indiraji took up the office of the prime minister. Santokhba depicts the scene in a ceremonial manner encompassing the oath taking ceremony including the broadcast to the nation. The broadcast is drawn in a unique fashion with all the paraphernalia of All India Radio. In another panel Santokhba depicts Indiraji moving around caring for the underprivileged people. Santokhba also portrays Indiraji taking salute at the marchpast ceremony on the occasion of Independence Day.

The election campaign conducted by Indiraji is another highlight of Santokhba's canvas. The Cow and Calf election symbol looms large over the scenario. Thereafter, she depicts the scenes of Indo-Pak War and the circumstances leading to the creation of Bangladesh. She draws scenes of the great influx of refugees from the eastern border of India. The war scenes are depicted with loads of weapons and soldiers, but again without the touch of 'Red' as blood!

In the panel depicting the marriage scene of Rajiv Gandhi, we find Indiraji applying *Mehandi* on the hands of her daughter-in-law Soniaji with love and care. The ornamental saree and garland of Soniaji is the highlight of the occasion. The exchange of *varmala* with Rajiv Gandhi is another address of Santokhba where Indian traditions come to the fore.

The birth scenes of Indiraji's grand children Priyanka and Rahul are depicted in traditional style and the attires of the figures are complementary to Santokhba's own colour concept. Soniaji is depicted wearing a red saree with the fringes of yellow colour. Both these colours signify auspiciousness.

Santokhba also draws the marriage scene of Sanjay Gandhi in her traditional style but the extravaganza of the occasion is somehow missing in the treatment. Another touching scene in the canvas is the death of Sanjay Gandhi where the whole family is shown mourning the accidental death.

We find Santokhba always maintaining a continuum of birth, marriage and death which remains the under current of *Priyadarshini's* life. The aesthetic play of symbolism is another important angle of Santokhba's canvas as she draws the death of Indiraji in a divine manner when we see Indiraji clad in a white robe with a lamp in her hand walking up to the *Akash Ganga* for her celestial traverse.

