

ARCHIVES

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SANTOKBA'S SCROLLS



The odds were against her. She was 65, illiterate and was not exactly rolling in wealth. And yet, Santokba took the painting brush in hand, responding to an inner call. What took shape from the brush is amazing. She painted on cloth stories in sequence. She did a 54 feet long scroll on Ramayana, which was bought by Air India. Then she did a series on the stories from Mahabharata, which was purchased by some German art collectors. She did the life of Indira Gandhi in 250 metres.

IGNCA has in its archives Santokba's Mahabharata scroll, measuring 1.2 km (1,200 m) as also the 25-metre-long scroll depicting the life of Mahatma Gandhi. The scroll (with IGNCA) on Mahabharata is only half the story of the epic, up to *Vana Parva* (the forest chapter). The scroll begins with the scene of Rishi Vyasa dictating the story to Lord Ganesha. The scroll was acquired by IGNCA in 1993. She sold it to raise money for continuing her work.

Santokba comes from an agricultural family. She was widowed young and had to work hard to bring up her three children. She worked as farm hand, did stone crushing and many such daily wage odd jobs. Her eldest son studied and trained to be an artist. It is through him that she awoke to the canvas. Santokba spends 8 to 10 hours a day paints. And as she paints she sings folk songs in her native Gujarati dialect.



vyasa dictating the Mahabharata as Ganesha writes

Santokba refers to no text. She draws and paints the story of Mahabharata as she had heard from her elders. Her representations are vivid and communicate with the viewer. For instance, she has left the eyes Dhritrashtra blank to indicate he was blind. Shakuni's eyes are represented one black and one white. Her figurines of Gods and Goddesses are indicated by their easily identifiable symbols like Shiva with snake around the neck, Krishna with flute, Rama with a bow etc. Santokba uses only vegetable dyes

and they come from Rajasthan. They are expensive. But her children have supported her, sometimes even borrowing money. Noted painter K K Hebber, after seeing her Mahabharata said he was amazed and much impressed by Santokba's naivety and sense of colour and design.

It would be inappropriate not to mention that Santokba sold her Mahabharata scroll to IGNCA at nearly half the price some foreign organisations and art collectors were willing to pay her. In fact, given the number of foreign buyers interested in her work, she could have auctioned her painting for a huge amount. But Santokba, in her simplicity and her commitment to the cultural heritage of India, desired that the scroll should remain within India and IGNCA is the fortunate home for this incredible work, in itself an epic.



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