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Mobilizing the 'Masses': Imagining Gandhi

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Abstract
This paper seeks to examine how the less structured and less sophisticated rural and small town crowds responded and registered the charisma of national figure of Gandhi. After independence, the official image of the 'Father of the Nation' might have been pruned of the accretions of the fiction and contradictions, but fiction and paintings had a major role in making Gandhi locally available.

Keywords: kanthapura, harikatha, nandlal bose, nationalist, linocut, image, myth

Introduction

Heroes and leaders are always needed. The leaders of revolutionary social movements are often said to have almost supernatural powers to inspire and motivate masses of followers. Max Weber (1968) called this ability 'charisma'. A movement's followers often attribute special powers to their leader. This process may produce additional myths about the leader's powers and add to whatever personal magnetism the leader originally possessed. Myriad myths, scholarly, biographical literature and innumerable legends have built around the life of Mahatma Gandhi. His life and thought became the fulcrum for mobilizing the masses during one of the most gigantic nationalist struggle of the twentieth century. In the process, fiction and facts were employed with equal felicity. Images, anecdotes and legends of Mahatma, the political and spiritual leader, were widely popularized by the local leaders and followers.

In the present paper I am interested in looking at how the less structured and less sophisticated rural and small town crowds responded and registered the charisma of this national figure. After independence, the official image of the 'Father of the Nation' might have been pruned of the accretions of the fiction and contradictions, but fiction had a major role in making Gandhi locally available. Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* highlights some of the process through which the image of Gandhi was imbued with local colour and made assimiliable by association with local traditions and beliefs (which may be religious). The canonization of *Kanthapura* itself indicates the emergence of Gandhism as a national culture that has contributed in shaping the contours of modern India. Raja Rao's ritualized adoption of Gandhi in the novel allows us to rethink Gandhi's historical role as part of the project of a specific Indian modernity as spiritual father in a non iconic way or as a representative of specifically Indian or even Hindu communitarian vision as opposed to modernity.

Gandhi's call for independent India allowed villagers the wish to subvert the local oppressive structures of zamindari and caste hierarchies. His vision of the self reliant villages was communicated through his travels across the country. Nandlal Bose's paintings and sketches of Gandhi presented the visual icon for the masses that were charged with the hope of change. For the illiterate people in the villagers visual medium held great significance. The simple portrayal of village people engaged in their daily chores allowed them a sense of involvement in the nation's destiny. Moreover, these paintings mark a critical moment in modern Indian art history as they blend the classical and folk to evolve a new modern idiom.

Gandhi is often credited as the first Indian leader to have made the Indian independence movement a mass movement through his program of non-voilent non-cooperation. This mass base was further broadened by his second movement of civil disobedience that climaxed in the Dandi March. It is important to remember that Gandhi's aim was not merely political independence; he exhorted the people to strive for complete social & spiritual regeneration. For him, "it is *Swaraj* when we learn to rule ourselves. It is, therefore, in the palm of our hands. But such *Swaraj* has to be experienced, by each one for himself" (*Hind Swaraj*, Ch. XIV). Thus, he encouraged people to work for social reforms, economic independence and spiritual reawakening, and in so far as these could not be achieved under a foreign rule, Gandhi aimed at political independence.

Gandhi's constitutionalist and economic ideas were radically decentralist state as he argued for 'village *swaraj'*. He is often regarded anti-modern for his opposition to industrialization and technology and favoring self-reliant, self governing village communities. Gandhi did not regard the machinery as inherently evil, was rather averse to the exploitation and unemployment that industries brought in their wake. Instead, he focused on productivity improvements like the *charkha* that were cheap, easy to use and empowered small peasant communities. This view of broad-based development worked well with Gandhi's mobilization of people living in far-reaching villages and districts.

Ranajit Guha (1997) and others have pointed the disciplinary effects of Gandhi's moral injunctions, in which self-purification and control were translated into a

political goal. Gandhi's discomfiture with the mass, spontaneous unrest is well known. Instead, he channeled the political anger into peaceful mass activities, for instance, prayer meetings. Popular unrest indeed began to mount around mid 1930's when mass unemployment, hunger, poverty and exploitation led people, especially poor peasants and workers, to organize & protest against the government and industrialists. While the British took to violent repression, Gandhi led Congress embraced non-violence to contain Left-motivated protests, strikes etc. In this way, Congress party was able to co-opt popular mobilization and the Left by presenting national unification as the pre-condition for social transformation.

However, Gandhi's deep concern for poverty is combined with a resolute disinterest in politicizing it in class terms, which invited the criticism of many socialists and communists. Any study of Gandhian political and spiritual power is, therefore, incomplete if we fail to see that people of various classes interpreted his ideas differently. Within the village itself, the zamindars and the peasants received Gandhi's ideas according to their own interest. Gandhi's ideal village was a community of peasants cultivating their own land and producing their own food, free from landlords who might subject them to a rural equivalent of the industrial exploration he so decried in towns.

Subaltern historian Shahid Amin in his essay "Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern U.P 1921-22" points out that non-violence as a theme appears to have a limited impact, given the violence which marked the "relationship of domination and subordination which constituted the stuff of everyday life in the countryside". Amin's article throws interesting light on the popular reactions to Gandhi, in particular on the double process of deification and instrumentalization. For the Indian peasant masses, Gandhi was a holy man because of his pure life and at the same time a kind of deity endowed with super natural powers which his followers could appropriate to defeat their enemies and oppressors.

The dominant interpretation of the Gandhian message among the peasantry was that of incitement to social reform through purification. It strengthened the arguments of the reformers who advocated the renunciation of alcohol or tobacco. The expectations and political consciousness triggered by Mahatma's visit is put thus by Amin,

> The enthusiasm Gandhi generated, the expectations he aroused and the attack he launched on British authority had all combined to initiate the very first moments of a process which, given other factors could help the peasant to conceptualize the turning of his world upside down. This was incipient political consciousness called upon, for the very first time, to reflect albeit vaguely and intermittently on the possibility of an inversion of many of those power relations deemed inviolable until then, such as British/Indian, landlord/peasant, high caste/low caste etc. (Gandhi as Mahatma, p25)

While the first of these power relations was part of the grand 'national' struggle for independence, the promise of dissolution of other binaries/ hierarchies brought the masses to rally for freedom struggle. Peasants could field for a 'national' movement since it promised them a dignified life free from economic exploitation and social harassment. Gandhi became the symbol and harbinger of hope for the depressed classes.

Gandhi's attitude to the institution of caste developed considerably over the years. For him, caste presented two district problems – the nature of caste division in general, and the particular issue of untouchability. Between 1916 and 1926, he had begun to distinguish between caste as actually found in India; and his ideal of caste, what he called *varnashrama*' [1]. In upholding *varnashrama*, as opposed to the current practice of caste distinctions, Gandhi was compromising between the claims of orthodoxy and reform. But in his attitude towards untouchability there was no element of compromise. Lower caste associations, through radical protests challenged the caste hierarchy, raising question about the very edifice of Hindu society, as well as upper caste bias of the nationalist movement led by the congress party (Ambedkar 1939). Both B.R. Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule pointed to the manner in which the Congress Party's privileging of political independence from the British had failed to consider the "first" colonization of the untouchables. Gandhi led a largely moral campaign against untouchability. He failed to radically democratize the emerging shape of the Indian polity as he opposed the eradication of caste, as well as the fact that a more revolutionary upheaval of the caste system would necessarily have to confront the property relations that supported caste relations.

To the claim, that from 1920's onwards Gandhi "harnessed together the feelings of the masses and the ambitions of an elite", Judith M. Brown says "it was between the politicians and those one might call rural and small town elites that Gandhi acted as a political mediator, and rarely between the politicians and the masses" (p 337). To the really poor and illiterate his appeal was mainly social and religious.

In Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Moorthy, a high-caste western educated nationalist hero is needed to carry the message of Gandhian ideology to the largely illiterate villagers of the archaic, isolated Kanthapura. Moorthy's contact with the Mahatma is imaginary, as he has seen Gandhi only in a vision. This allows Rao to be free from historical fidelity to Gandhi's ideas. He is able to delineate the processes through which Gandhi's ideas and ambiguities therein led to their use by the local stakeholders.

It is significant to note how Moorthy's vision is evoked in religious terms.

> The Mahatma lifted him up and before them all, he said, what can I do for you, my son? And Moorthy said, like Hanuman to Rama, "Any command", and the Mahatma said, 'I give no commands save to seek Truth'
>
> (Kanthapura, p 53-4)

[1] Varnastrama was a cooperative society with its members divided into occupational groups, each fulfilling their own functions, but all of equal status

Gandhi, the political leader is imagined as a deity, sent down from heavens to 'slay the serpent of the foreign rule' [2] (p22). Moreover, Gandhi is introduced to the villagers through the religious medium of *harikatha* [3]. He is transmuted into a reincarnation of the Hindu God Shiva. The deification of Gandhi is made possible because of people's faith in the archetype of an incarnation of God. This avatar is then the savior of the people in distress, who establishes righteousness (*dharma*) and destroys the evil.

However, in order to make their participation in the freedom movement possible, it was important to provide the masses with a charismatic leader at the local level. Moorthy, a devotee of the Mahatma is conceived in quasi-divine role regarded as a veritable avatar of the divine. He practices and preaches non-violence and severe penance for other's sins. Meditation and fasting, the hallmarks of Gandhian spirituality are adopted by Moorthy to endear people to the Gandhian means for self-regeneration. The religious dimension of fast is, however, inescapable. Gandhi used the hunger strike as a means of expressing disapproval and protest, broadly as an appeal to the villagers and the lower classes. Thus, the conflation of religious and political allows Rao, through Moorthy, to translate historical contingency in terms comprehensible to the villagers.

Rumina Sethi regards *Kanthapura* as an example of 'history' conforming to 'romance' or time intersecting timelessness.

> The constant interplay between history and romance appears to have two advantages: it is both a means of escaping present subjection under colonialism and in turn glorifying timeless cultural myths, a device to bring the educated Indian reader in closer touch with an ostensibly 'Indian' reality. (*Myths of the Nation*, p82)

This reading corresponds with historical observation made by Peter Lang in his study of the novel. He writes

> It was only during the brief insurgence of Gandhism during the freedom struggle that it made use of certain innate aspects of Hinduism in order both to question certain in built assumptions of the colonial consciousness, as well as to subtly manipulate religion to serve political ends and hence participate in history. (*Myth Connections*, p55)

Thus Gandhi's socio-political ideology is translated by Moorthy into to a set of commandments in simple and clear terms "spin and practice 'ahimsa' and speak the truth". The decisive pragmatic leader Moorthy has a firm grasp over the local situation and also picks his language with care and economy. Thus, Moorthy, not only reflects his people's deep religious and mythical affiliations, but astuteness in systematically organizing the local congress party. There are protests by orthodox believers like Venkatakshama's protest to the radical distortions of the *harikatha*. She exclaims, on hearing that Mahatma of the title for *harikatha* is a "saint, a holyman",

> Holy man or lower of a widow, what does it matter to me? When I go to the temple I want to hear about Rama and Krishna and Mahadeva and not all this city nonsense said she. (*Kanthapura*, p10)

The confrontation of the orthodoxy, represented by the Swami and Bhatta, and Gandhism is presented in human terms. This is achieved through the traditional Brahmin woman narrator Achakka, who is perceptive to the slow transformation that occurs on her community's interface with Gandhism. She presents the clash of these forces through Bhatta's words

> The Mahatma is a good man and simple man. But he is making too much of these carcass eating Pariahs. Today, it will be the Pariahs, tomorrow it'll be the Mohammedans, and the day after the Europeans. We must stop this. This Swami says he will outcaste every Brahmin who has touched a Pariah. (*Kanthapura*, p 27)

Despite trying to break up the social system integral to traditional orthodoxy, and fighting to establish many other radical ideas, the people still want to remain close to the world of myth and tradition of their ancient religion. Thus Gandhian ideas of equality face fierce opposition due to the threat they pose to the caste differentiations and the routine system within which different castes of the village work. Even Moorthy finds it difficult to disabuse his mind from the prejudice of centuries that Pariahs are 'unclean'. He could face excommunication on account of them, but he finds difficult to enter their house and share food. As he crosses the threshold of Pariah Rachanna's house, he feels that

> All the gods & all the moves of heaven seem to cry out against him & his hands steal mechanically to the holy thread, and holding it, he feels the would like to say Hari-Om, Hari-Om, (*Kanthapura*, p105).

Moorthy, not unlike his prototype, cannot really forsake his caste solidarity that conflicts with the ideological or the nationalistic. Caste was a powerful source of social identity, protecting the individual within a specific caste group and safeguarding the accepted economic relations. Moorthy and Rangamma, the stalwarts of Gandhian ethics are themselves the beneficiaries of the caste system. Being a member of high caste and privileged class, Moorthy owns 27 acres of wet land, 54 acres of dry land, a cardamom garden, a 25 tree mango-grove and a small coffee plantation. Not to speak of Rang Gowda, the rock behind the Kanthapura Congress, who "has amassed solid gold in his coffers". The composition of Kanthapura Congress reflects the nature of the major nationalist party in the country.

[2] The allusion is to Krishna's victory over the serpent Kaliya in Hindu mythology.

3 Even today, the *harikatha* is used as a means of religious instruction where the *pandit* weaves a story to point a moral to the village audience. They could be used for political propaganda, although the religious form was retained.

Significantly, it is the Brahmins as radicals who triumph over Brahmins, the reactionaries. The institutions and beliefs of Brahmins in caste restrictions, the worship of cows, the Vedic representation of women, and the philosophy of Vedanta have all been evoked in the name of Hinduism by cultural revivalists to act as unifying agents to further the nationalist cause.

When Moorthy asks people to spin, the economic pragmatism turns into religious sanction. "To wear cloth spun and woven with your hand is sacred", says the Mahatma and "Spinning is as purifying as praying". In this way even Nanjamma, a brahmin who is aware that it is unseemly for her caste to spin, immediately agrees to spin and accepts the free gift of a spinning wheel. It is interesting to see people's reception the Gandhian ideas of social and economic reform is also a part of their reverence for a holy man, the Mahatma. So even the most powerful man of Kanthapura, Patel Range Gowda, transforms Moorthy's exposition of the Gandhian ideology to an act of obedience.

> All I know is that what you told me about the Mahatma is very fine, and the Mahatma is a holy man and if the Mahatma says what you say, let the Mahatma's word be the world of God.

We see on the one hand that the ideological message is made palatable by giving it a religious form. On the other hand, Gandhian ideals are radically reinterpreted by the villagers in the terms of their own milieu. When Moorthy tries to explain the Gandhian ideal of loving one's enemy, even his docile women listeners are baffled. When the police beat Sidda who has thrown dung at a policeman for ogling at his sister, the villagers retaliate with a shower of old slippers, broomsticks, rags and dung along with stones. This sharp juxtaposition of historic reality of vindictive violence and the ideal of non-violence indicates the deep gulf that separates the mythical category of action where such blatant contradiction is unthinkable ad the concrete existential realty which is always a web of human complexities. Thus Moorthy's frustration at the end of the novel echoes the betrayal felt by a whole generation of Indians. He voices this new consciousness in his letter to Ratna.

> And I have come to realize bit by bit, and bit by bit, when I was in prison, that as long as there will be iron gates and barbed wires round the Skeffington Coffee Estate, and city cars that can roll up the Bebbur mound, and gas-lights and coolie cars, there will always be Pariahs and poverty. Ratna, things must change.

By the 1930's, during the Dandi March, Gandhi became one of the most durable and widely circulated icons of Indian nationalism. Nandlal Bose's linocut image of Gandhi (see Fig 1) made in response to the march to sea that year protesting the British taxation on salt. As it was cheap to reproduce, it became the most widely circulated image of the leader of the Indian freedom movement. It also helped to unify the groups who participated in the movement stressing the traditional in opposition to the divisions which British rule and influence had caused. Even in the mundane matters of dress and language, by dressing himself and other leaders in 'khadi' and exhorting them to speak a vernacular, Gandhi brought them closer to the rest of the population, appearing to iron out differences between rich and poor, educated and illiterate. Literally and metaphorically Gandhi clothed the leaders of modern India in the robes of tradition, and thus eased India's passage into the modern world.

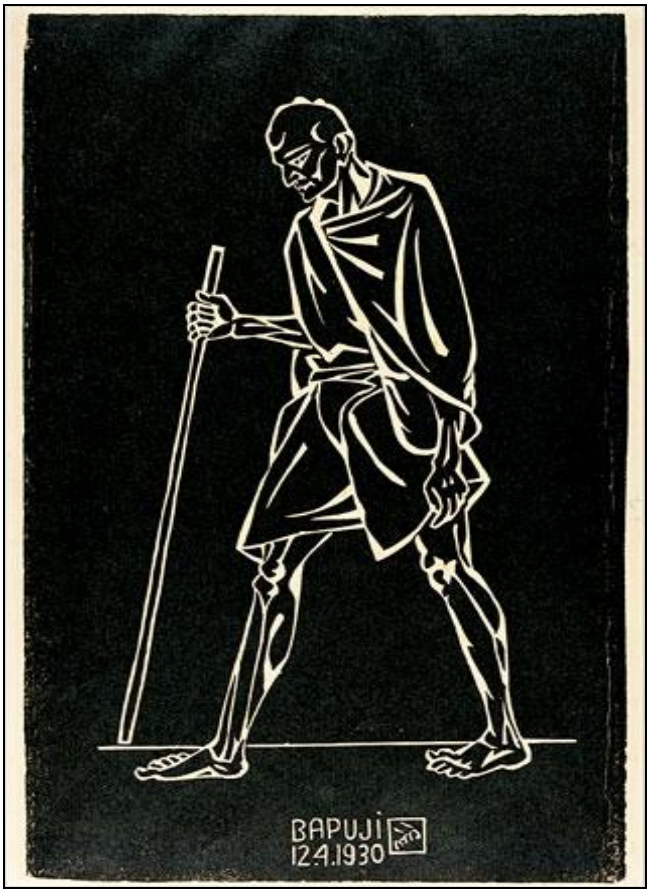

Fig 1: Bapuji (1930)

Nandlal Bose perfectly expressed the elements inspiration of the artists from the life of Mahatma Gandhi. He wrote

Mahatmaji may not be an artist in the same sense that we professional artists are, nevertheless I cannot but consider him to be a true artist. All his life he has spent in creating his own personality and in fashioning others after his ideals. His mission is to make Gods out of men of clay. I am sure his ideal will inspire the artists of the world.

("The True Artist", p 292)

The advantage of using visual imagery to present a political message was quickly seized during the struggle for independence. Bose was sensitive to the power of the Mahatma as the ubiquitous icon, and availed the icon visually to the people of the country. Evidently, the form of linocut helped Bose to get the most basic image without any religious markers. The stick allows the people to easily identify with the leader of civil

disobedience movement which elicited overwhelming response from the masses even in the far-flung regions of the country. It is the image of an industrious man, with bowed head.

Bose, like Mahatma Gandhi, believed that India's strength lay in her villages, and his depictions of the people who lived in the rural communities strongly reflect that belief. Undoubtedly, Gandhi selected Bose to decorate the pavilions of the INC for three consecutive session in 1936, 1937, and 1938. and in his famous Haripura Congess panels of 1938- a playful panorama of Indian popular life and culture- we see a rich blending of a 'classical', 'folk' and modern vocabulary in producing an art that could signify the nation. Tapati Guha Thakurta places these posters in the history of modern Indian art

> In both its choice of form and theme, these panels were concerned with the imaging of village India, with presenting a spectacle of Indian popular life and culture for a national public forum.

The Haripura poster titled "Shehnaiwala" (Fig 2) foregrounds an unusual vibrancy of drawing and brushwork and boldness of line, colour and form. The engagement with rural life and folk art traditions located in the everyday life presents the physical terrains and living traditions of 'Village India'. Rather than society portraiture in western academic training, which preferred the rich and the powerful, Bose's paintings drew on an older tradition that accorded dignity to every aspect of society. In this political and social inclusivity lay, as critic Gayatri Sinha puts it, "the spirit of a new, nascent nationhood".

Curator Quintanilla appreciates his Indian visual medium, she observes

> Nandlal's paintings of the Santal tribals, who lived in the villages surrounding the university campus at Santiniketan, lend them such a dignity and so revealed the harmony of their lives with the nature that Mahatma Gandhi's considered Nandlal's paintings to be completely in line with his own ideals for a strong independent nation.

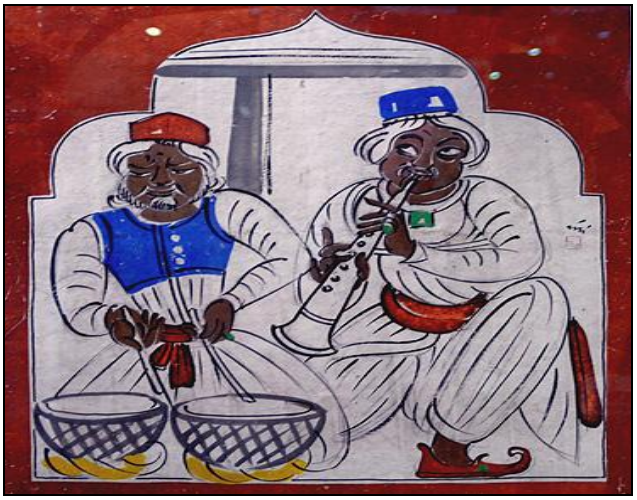

Fig 2: Shehnaiwala (1938): Haripura Congress Poster

The landscape of Bengal is distinct with round hills, uproarious waves, overcast sky and straight trees. The title "New Clouds" (Fig 3) signifies the promise of monsoon and youth. It presents an almost mytho-poeic view of nymphs passing through the woods. However, the bent shoulders of these young girls hint not only their coyness but the historical treatment of the tribals. The portrayal of the tribals in scenic beauty might have been a gesture of registering their presence in the national psyche but it cannot evade their exclusion in the decision making by even Congress as a nationalist party.

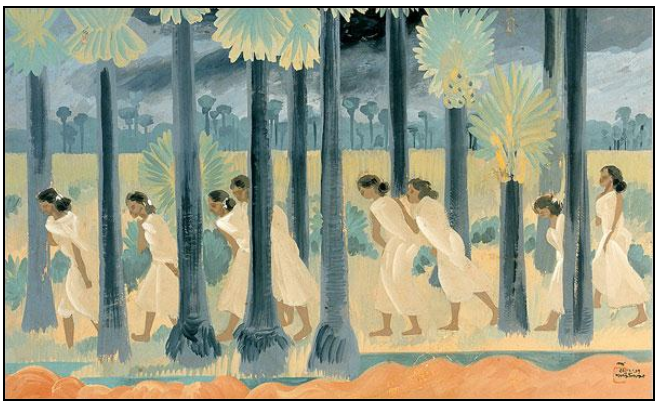

Fig 3: New Clouds (1937)

Fig 4 is an untitled Haripura poster, it presents a famine like situation that brought large scale human tragedy in their wake. What interests the viewer here is the close interdependence of the man and the beast. In the days of distress, as in the happier times both sustain each other. These are the scenes that most peasants and rural people could relate to and the promise of the self-reliant Gandhian village in the independent India inspired them to action.

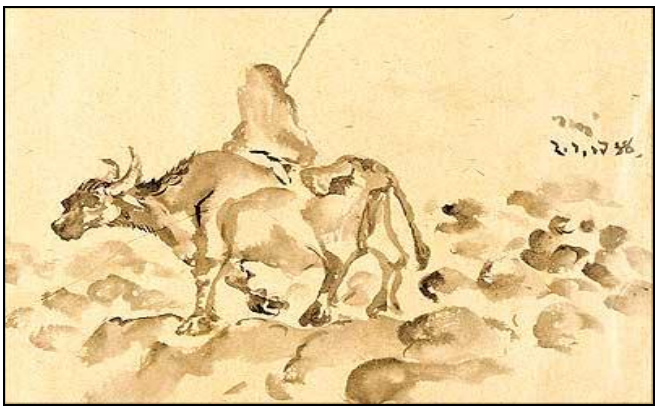

Fig 4: Untitled 1938, Haripura Congress Poster

To conclude, the nationalist movement made it imperative for artists to seek compelling new roots in alternative sources of tradition and employ a different visual vocabulary. While Gandhi lent himself to imaging, he was imagined by the masses. Gandhi's ideas of political, social and economic freedom, allowed the peasant population to protest against local oppressive structures of caste and zamindari. However, there was not

much radical restructuring as the interpretation was mediated by the local bourgeois interpreters. Rao carefully unfolds the effects of Gandhism on an archaic village, and in the process it becomes clear how excessive reliance on religious imagery led Gandhi to be appropriated by secularists and Hindu revivalsts. Nandlal Bose's presentation of Gandhi and the villagers in various hues redefined the way in which Indians viewed themselves in the grand narrative of nationalism.

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