



Dr Mohinder Singh Randhawa as a Pillar of Support to the Refugee Artists in India

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Abstract

India's partition was a devastating time for the people residing on both sides of the border. Blood flowed in the streets like water, many losing their life, home, property and honour. Thousands were dislocated from their homes hoping to find shelter in unknown cities. The region of Punjab was the most affected by this division. India had lost Lahore which was the art centre of northern India forcing many non-Muslim artists of the region to look for new adobe in foreign land. When fulfilling basic needs becomes an ordeal, then usually a creative need like art takes a backseat. However times like these also surface in works of artists as a muse, especially of the ones who had suffered misery. For this sufferings to mature into art it is necessary for the art and the artist to first survive this hard period and for that dislocated artists needed to not only find employment but also sympathy of a connoisseur. In this paper I would like to concentrate on the refugee artists like, Sobha Singh and M K Bardhan, who found encouragement from Dr. Mohinder Singh Randhawa to successfully establish themselves in the world of Indian art. As an able bureaucrat and an authority on Pahari Painting Randhawa's role cannot be ignored but in this paper the aim is to bring to notice his effort and contribution to the encouragement of refugee artists, who were trying to establish themselves away from their homes. This paper aims to bring forth this humane aspect of M S Randhawa's nature which has helped build lives of many artists. I, essentially, will discuss only two artists, Sobha Singh and M K Bardhan, in this paper. These two artists had taken refuge in India after being dislocated from their homes. While one comes from across the west border, the other is from across the east border and yet their situation in life has many similarities. They also had a supporter like Dr. Randhawa who did not let their spirits and talent diminish in the hardships of life. I will also briefly discuss Nek Chand as he too came from across the border during the partition, although he had started creating art in the early 1950's but it was in the 1970's that he really needed help of Dr. Randhawa to protect his work so we cannot put him in the same bracket as the other two. However since he too gained from support of Dr. Randhawa it becomes essential to discuss him as well.

Keywords:- Dr. Mohinder Singh Randhawa, refugee artists, All India Fine Arts & Crafts Society (AIFACS), Roopa-Lekha

Introduction

Dr Mohinder Singh Randhawa was born in 1909 in a small village called Zira in the district of Ferozepur (Punjab). He studied at primary level in a local school in Muktsar and for higher education he joined Govt. College Lahore, where he did his B.Sc. (Hons) in Botany and M.Sc. in 1929 and 1930 respectively. In 1934 Randhawa

joined the Indian Civil Service and during his training he visited England for the duration of a year and on his return was posted as Assistant Magistrate, Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh. Randhawa being a well-travelled man had interest in various subjects, art being one of them. Although he was man of science but his interest in art was quite profound. He not only acquired vast knowledge on the subject but earnestly worked in service of art. He is well known for his resourceful writings on the Pahari Paintings. Randhawa is also known for his contributions in establishing of various Art galleries and museums in and around Punjab.ⁱ He sympathised with the artists and to encourage them he often bought their paintings for his private collection or for some organization that he represented. He was known for giving verbal encouragement to young artists and if invited would take out time from his busy schedule to visit their exhibitions.ⁱⁱ He often wrote on artists and their works in newspapers and art journals like Roopa-Lekha. Randhawa became the chairman of the 'All India Fine Arts & Crafts Society' (AIFACS), in 1947.ⁱⁱⁱ In this capacity he was able to organise many exhibitions in Delhi which encouraged art and artists of the region. He would often invite his fellow officers and industrialists to these exhibitions and encourage them to buy works for their organizations and also for their private collection.^{iv} This financial gain benefited the artists immensely. Dr Randhawa was a humble man who would make an effort to know the artists on a personal level despite his busy life and his stature. Being the first Chief Commissioner of Chandigarh, he initiated establishment of art societies like Punjab Arts Council and Lalit Kala Akademi Chandigarh in the city. His artistic sensibility helped art and artists of the northern region of the country to grow in a healthy environment. His aim was to create a social structure enriched with art for common public and to educate them in this regard. He wanted common people to participate in various artistic activities which were generally considered privilege of the rich class.

Sobha Singh

Dr. Randhawa had first met artist Sobha Singh in Lahore in 1929 while he (Randhawa) was a student of Botany in the Government College, Lahore. He had employed the artists to recreate some of Randhawa's pencil sketches of algae in black ink for his thesis for M.Sc. on algae. On visiting Sobha Singh's shop, Randhawa was quite impressed by his works, about which he later says, "Here at last, I felt, was a true Punjabi artist painting genre scenes from the life of the people of Punjab."^v Briefly in 1931 Sobha Singh had migrated to Delhi to set up his studio in Connaught Place. Although he was a great success as a commercial artist but he again went back to Lahore, to a countryside placed midway between Lahore and Amritsar, on invitation of Gurbux Singh, editor of *Preet Lari*, to live in a colony of idealists consisting of writers, painters and educationists flocked from all over Punjab. However he had to flee empty handed from Lahore during the riots in 1947. He left behind more than sixty paintings along with household goods. In India he came to village Andretta in the Kangra Valley with some of his apprentices. Slowly he started to re-establish his work and managed to buy a two *kanals* plot to build a cottage. To earn money needed for building his cottage he again decided to come to Delhi but found it hard to sell his works due to chaos of 1947 partition. Randhawa was then posted in Ambala and invited Sobha Singh to stay in his house. In Ambala the artist was greeted with a warm welcome. Randhawa not only made the stay of Sobha Singh comfortable in the city but also organised an exhibition of his works in Sirhind Club,

Ambala Cantonment. His paintings were purchased by the Indian Air Force officers. Randhawa also purchased a painted portrait of Guru Gobind Singh from the artist for the library established in the Ambala City.^{vi} From these sales Sobha Singh was able to collect enough money to build his cottage in Andretta. Deeply moved with this generous gesture of Dr. Randhawa, Sobha Singh executed a bronze bust of his host, which is now part of the Government Art Gallery and Museum, Chandigarh's collection. Later on in 1985, Randhawa also wrote a book on Sobha Singh and his art. In this regard Randhawa's contribution in encouraging Sobha Singh is commendable.

Sobha Singh painted in the medium of oil and his paintings were inspired by the paintings of Kangra School. He was a master painter of portraits of Sikh Guru and his portraits of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh have become some of the most liked painted religious images. He was an academic style of painter and was often influenced by the Christian art. He also liked painting the genre scenes of Punjab. Folk tales of the region also surfaced in his works. His painted depiction of romantic tales of the Punjab, like Sassi and Punnun and Sohni Mahiwal, has captured the interest of many. Besides these themes Sobha Singh has also painted scenes from the life of the Gurus, Omar Khayam and also scenes from the life of Mughal kings, like Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal.

M.K.Bardhan

Mrinal Kanti Bardhan is a well known name in Indian art today. He was born in 1930 in Feni (now in Bangladesh) and he joined Fine Arts at the Government College of Arts Crafts, Calcutta, India to study Painting & Sculpture. He also completed a course in History of Art & Art Appreciation from Ashutosh Museum, University of Kolkata. He came to India as a refugee and made it his home and in 1953 he came to Delhi where he remained till the end of his life.

Bardhan was recipient of many prestigious awards like National Award of Lalit Kala Academi New Delhi, President of India's Silver Plaque for outstanding exhibit, All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, New Delhi and Award for the best painting of the year from Academy of Fine Arts Amritsar along with Nehru Gold Medal and An awards for best painting by Chitra Kala Sangam, New Delhi.^{vii} His works are part of many known galleries and museum in Indian and abroad like Moscow Art Gallery, Moscow; Sophia Art Gallery, Bulgaria; Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi; Punjab Museum, Chandigarh; Ministry of External Affairs, India; National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi; All India Fine Arts & Crafts Society, New Delhi.

Dr. Randhawa recognized the talent of young Bardhan and gave him an opportunity to exhibit his works in an exhibition organized by the All India Fine Arts & Crafts Society (AIFACS) in 1963. Randhawa also wrote a column in the art journal *Roopa-Lekha*, to give recognition to the artist. Besides discussing the theme and stylistic approach of his paintings, Randhawa in this piece also writes, "There are few artists in his age group whose exhibitions of paintings have attracted so much notice in Delhi."^{viii} This positive review by Randhawa, not only boost the morale of Bardhan but also kindled the curiosity of the reader to view the artist's works.

M K Bardhan's paintings had three different phases if seen in retrospective. In the first phase, around early 1960's, his works had dark and a lot of stark figures, expressing miserable, helpless, distressing emotions, rendered in broad strokes can be seen. The medium was Oils, with textured layering of thick wax coating. The colour palette was sombre with dark hues of earth shades. These paintings established his reputation as a serious artist. In the next phase, 1965 to 1980, Bardhan started incorporating concurrent creation of mural designs using narrative quality in his work. His colour scheme, which was initially monochromatic, changed into brilliant creation of light and shade applied more flatly with texture like appearance. Female forms started appearing in various compositions. It is also believed that his work in the second phase is influenced by his reading of Indian mythology and childhood memories of *Jatra*, juxtaposed with masterly drawing techniques. His treatment of figures were minimalistic but were extremely expressive which gave them a very contemporary outlook. The third phase on the other hand was an outcome of his travels to Europe and America, which he undertook after his retirement. He viewed works of various masters during these trips, which is considered to be the reason of the change in his work. He eventually started experimenting with the medium of soft-pastel which complimented his linear forms. This resulted in very bright, fresh and effervescent works. This was the final stage in development of his art. He continued with this style until his demise in 2010. Along with painting, M K Bardhan had also engaged himself in various art forms like illustrations, graphic design, mural paintings and designing of commemorative stamps commissioned by the government of India.

Beside these two artists I would like to mention Nek Chand Saini, the creator of the 'Rock Garden'. Like the other two artist Nek Chand was also a refugee. He hailed from Pakistan. He was born in 1924 in a family of Landlords in Berian-Kalan, (now in Pakistan). His native village was about ninety kilometres north of Lahore. He had done his Matriculation from the Lahore University and was living a quiet life until the August of 1947. At the age of twenty three Nek Chand had to leave his home with his family to save his life during the partition riots. He and his family settled in Gurdaspur in India. In 1949, Nek Chand was given employment with the Highway Department as a part of Refugee Employment Programme.^{ix} In 1951 Nek Chand was appointed as a Road Inspector with Chandigarh Public Works Department. It was around 1958 that Nek Chand started creating a world he called the 'Kingdome of Devs'. He started installing sculptures on government land through which a road was to pass according to the original plan of the city. Nek Chand had been working there in secret for more than eighteen years but in 1976 his secret was disclosed as the land was cleared for the construction of the road. Nek Chand feared destruction of his creation as it was illegal to construct anything on the government land. To save his creation he turned towards Dr. M S Randhawa who was the Chairman of the Chandigarh Landscape Committee at the time. On viewing the creation of Nek Chand, Dr M S Randhawa, was so impressed that he placed a note before the Chandigarh Landscape Committee to consider this unique installation as a garden of rocks and resolved the issue by bringing the project under the beautification of the city and naming it the 'Rock Garden'.^x Nek Chand's creation not only survived destruction but has thrived since then. Today it is known world over and has become face of Chandigarh. Many phases to the garden have been added since then. Dr. Randhawa

not only saved the garden but also helped Nek Chand establish himself as an artist whose work has an international appeal.

Conclusion

Dr. Randhawa's contribution to encourage artists is worth appreciation. The help that he extended to the artists not only aided that particular artists but also helped in the development of modern and contemporary Indian art. His particular kindness to the refugee artists helped these talented men to not only survive in India but also thrive in their field. It is due to his encouragement, proficiency in finding buyers for their work and his assistance in selling their works that Randhawa has kept the light of hope ignited in the hearts of the artists. In Dr Randhawa, artists found a true friend who reassured them and also found an able solution for their problems. Instead of giving them charity he gave work, keeping up their spirits and dignity. The art world of India will always be indebted to this humble man.

ⁱ 'An extract from Welcome Address by Shri Kulbir Singh, Chief Engineer, Capital Project on the occasion of the inauguration of the Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh, on May 6, 1968', A Handy Guide, The Government Museum And Art Gallery, Chandigarh, 2003.

ⁱⁱ Singh, Prem, 'M S Randhawa- A Friend of Artist', Dr M S Randhawa - A Commemorative Exhibition, Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh, 1987.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pal, B P, 'Association of Dr M S Randhawa with the All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society', Roopa-Lekha Vol XXXVIII No1&2, 1969.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Randhawa, M S, 'Art of Sobha Singh', Roopa-Lekha, Vol -LVII, No.1&2,1985.

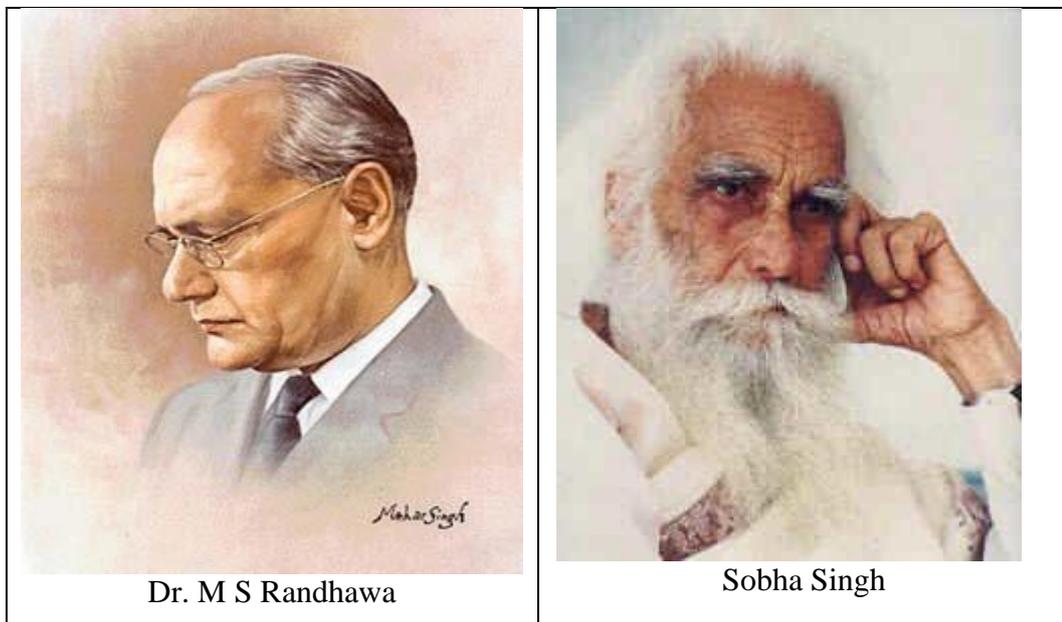
^{vi} Ibid.

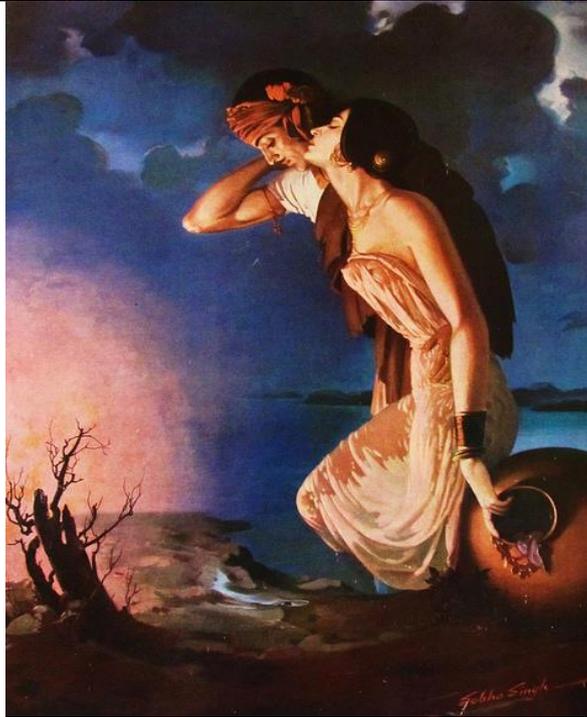
^{vii} http://www.aifacs.org.in/main.php?p=members_profile&mem_id=26

^{viii} Randhawa, M S, 'M. K. Bardhan', Roopa-Lekha, Vol XXXIII No.1&2,1963.

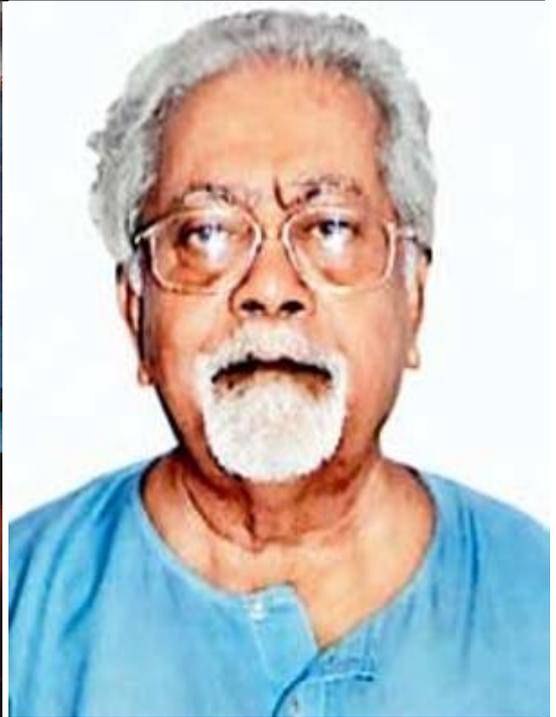
^{ix} Roohi, *Nek Chand's Dream World, Rock Garden*, Friends of Rock Garden, Chandigarh.

^x S.K. Sharma, 'A Road Inspector's fantasy in Rocks and Stones', *Roopa-Lekha*, Vol LVI, July, 1984.

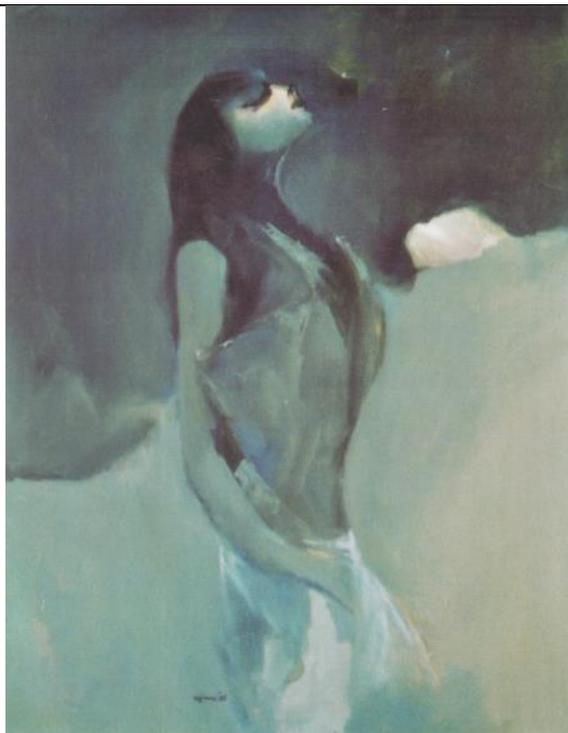




Sobha Singh, "Sohni Mahiwal", (oil)



M K Bardhan



M K Bardhan, "On A Moon-Lit Night"
(oil) 76 x 91 cms



Nek Chand, Rock Garden, Chandigarh.