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Karusangha: The Living Legacy of Art and Craft at Santiniketan

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Abstract: The concept of Karusangha, meaning association of artisans, embodies the enduring spirit of collective creativity and craftsmanship that has shaped South Asia's socio-cultural identity across generations. It emerged in the 20th century as a significant socio-economic and cultural movement aimed at empowering craftsmen in Bengal. It sought to revive and sustain indigenous crafts while promoting economic independence through collective production, fair trade practices, and community-based welfare. It united artisans under a common platform to promote self-reliance, equitable labor relations and the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems. The Karusangha model not only empowered marginalised craft communities through cooperative production and shared ownership but also redefined the relationship between art, labor and community. In the post-independence period, its ideals found resonance within state-led handcraft cooperatives and rural development programmes, though bureaucratic intervention and market pressures often diluted its participatory ethos. Nevertheless, the Karusangha continues to serve as a living legacy- bridging tradition and innovation in the contemporary craft economy. By examining Karusangha as both a historical phenomenon and a living institution, this article explores how collective artistry operates as a mode of cultural resilience and economic empowerment, reaffirming the centrality of craftsmanship in shaping identity and sustainable development in the modern era.

Key Words: Indigenous, Craft practice, Collective authorship, creative practice, community, handcraft, sustain livelihood

Introduction:

Karusangha at Santiniketan was not merely a craft society but a socio-cultural experiment that embodied the ideals of Rabindranath Tagore's rural reconstruction movement and Nandalal Bose's philosophy of art as an integral part of life. Emerging in late colonial Bengal, a period marked by Industrial decline and the search for a revitalised cultural identity, Karusangha offered a model where craft became both a medium of aesthetic refinement and a vehicle for

economic empowerment. It functioned as a collective workshop where artists, students and village craft people collaborated to create objects that fused indigenous techniques with modern design sensibilities. By doing so, Karusangha redefined the purpose of artistic production – shifting it away from the purely decorative towards a socially embedded practice that addressed rural self-sufficiency, women's participation in economic life and the preservation of traditional skills. The initiative also reflected the broader intellectual climate of Santiniketan, where education was conceived as holistic, combining manual training with intellectual growth. In this period, Karusangha was both a site of cultural negotiation and a laboratory for experimenting with alternative economics, anticipating later discourses on sustainable design and community-based art and craft practice. Its legacy lies in showing how craft could serve as a tool for cultural regeneration, social empowerment and the creation of a distinctively modern yet rooted Bengali identity.

Karusangha was founded in the year 1930 at Santiniketan. It was not merely an artists' association of craftsmen; it embodied a philosophy and a way of life. The organisation was established with the purpose of enhancing the economic well-being of artist and artisans through functional art practices. Around 1920, Nandalal Bose took the charge of Kala Bhavan as its Acharya. He was deeply engaged with fine arts, craft, pedagogy, festivals and also had a close connection with each of the students there. By the 1930s, many of his student had completed their training and left Santiniketan in search of livelihood. At that time, surviving solely by selling paintings was nearly impossible. As a result, several artist were compelled to take up other forms of work, compromising their creative practice. Nandalal found this situation deeply disheartening and sought a solution that would allow artists to sustain themselves without abandoning their art. In the 1930s, he began creating an artists' colony on five bighas of land adjacent to his house.[1] Nandalal envisioned a cooperative model where art could thrive independently. He believed that creating a collective, self-sustaining environment was the only way to keep artistic practice alive and meaningful.

Probhat Mohan Banerjee was the main force behind the founding of this association. He was a prominent commercial artist with strong ties to Calcutta and other publishing houses, and served as its secretary.[2] With him there was Ramkinkar Baij, Sudhi Khastagir, V.S. Masoji, Manindra Bhusan Gupta, Hirendra Ghosh, Keshav Rao, Banabihari Ghosh and Indusudha Ghosh.[3] Nandalal believed that handicrafts served a dual purpose. They not only brought beauty into everyday life but also offered a practical means of livelihood. Jamuna Sen recalled that – Mastermosai (Nandalal Bose) always said that one cannot fill one's stomach merely by paintings. If one had a craft to rely on, one did not need to depend on others for money- that's why he put such emphasis on craft alongside painting.[4] It was hoped that the Karusangha would enable them to keep some of the old students actively connected with the Kala Bhavan.[5]

The older students of Kala Bhavan had organised the guild Karusangha with the object of supplying to the general public various artistic works such as Designing, Fresco painting, Terracotta work, Embroidery, Batik and also for publishing artwork.[6] The primary objective of Karusangha was to strike a balance between earning and creating. Karusangha's mission was to build a close-knit artists' association where members could live and work side by side, nurturing a vibrant environment for creativity. By transcending personal interests and supporting each other's artistic pursuits, they hoped to prevent the stagnation or decline of their inner creative spirit and also to establish a sustainable economic model: taking orders for crafts and applied arts from across India, pooling the earnings into a common shared fund and using that fund as an interest-free source of loans for members. These loans could be repaid from future income, thereby ensuring financial stability without compromising artistic freedom.[7] It will give freedom from colonial market dependency. This mechanism turned the community into a self-reliant artistic ecosystem- an alternative cultural economy that challenged colonial commercial hierarchies and protected the dignity of artistic labour.

Between 1930 to 1933, the work done by Karusangha increased day by day. One such work was likely Nandalal Bose's poster painting for the "Health is wealth" wall painting competition- a striking image on brown paper in poster colors, depicting a young mother dancing with her child holding his hand. This painting, submitted under Karusangha's seal, won a prize of one hundred rupees. The prize money became the seed fund for Karusangha's common treasury, which was then used to purchase essential equipment such as set squares, Drawing Boxes, and cloth.[8]

In its early phase, the collective earned a steady income primarily through book illustration and decoration (pustak prasadhan). Artists such as Ramkinkar Baij, Sudhir Khastagir, Masoji, Pravat Mohan and Keshav Rao contributed in illustrations for various books, charging three to ten rupees per work. It was known that Ramkinkar created several remarkable illustrations for Gurusaday Dutta's *Chander Buri,* first published in Asharh 1340 and reprinted in 1935, Ashrah and 1402 Ashrah. In the preface, Gurusaday Dutta wrote, the famous painter and principal of Santiniketan Kala Bhavan, Nandalal Bose had printed the cover with his incomparable brush…. The remaining illustrations had been drawn by the artists of Karusangha. The illustrations stood out for their originality and stylistic distinctiveness, particularly when compared to the book illustration practices of that era.[9]

Karusangha also engaged in sculptural work. For instance, Ramkinkar Baij created two relief sculptures of ducks in the Ajanta style, crafted in Cement, for the residence of Ardhendru Kumar Gangopadhyay. This project earned fifty rupees for the collective. Karusangha also received orders for black and white and color illustrations. Nandalal's drawing of *Kabuliwala* and *Mini* were sold for ten rupees each. Beyond paintings, the collective produced embroidery, textiles, batik leather purse, and small handbags for sale.[10]

In 1930, Indusudha Ghosh's book of embroidery designs, *Sibani,* was published under Karusangha's banner. The foreword was written by Abanindranath Tagore, and Indusudha herself contributed a beautiful essay on the use of color.[11] The essay was particularly valuable because it captures a key element of Nandalal and Kala Bhavan's educational philosophy- a combination of learning directly from nature and cultivating personal taste and originality. Indusudha's reflections provide a window into Nandalal's philosophy of design and offer a glimpse into the experimental approach to design education of Santiniketan.[12] Later, Visva Bharati published Hiren Ghosh's *Sucher Phor*, another work on embroidery. Nandalal expressed the wish to publish Hiren Ghosh's book through Karusangha itself. From the second volume of *Bharat Shlpi Nandalal*, we came to know that an important order once came from Sarnath's Mulagandhakuti Vihara for sculpture and Fresco work. Nandalal planned with the assistance of others and executed the frescos. While Ramkinkar Baij would create the sculpture. However, due to legal complications, Nandalal could not proceed with the frescos, and it was believed that Ramkinkar's sculptures were never realised for the same reason. [13]

For Nandalal, decorative art was not just about ornamentation but a means of cultivating aesthetic sensibility while simultaneously providing a dignified source of livelihood- all without compromising artistic freedom. At Karusangha ordered craftwork was deliberately restricted to just a few days each month, allowing artists ample time to pursue their own independent creative work. Operating in the spirit of a traditional craft guild, Karusangha functioned as a cooperative under Nandalal's direct guidance. Each object carried a stamp of Karusangha, designed by Nandalal himself, rather than the names of individual makers, a conscious choice that emphasised collective authorship over personal credit. To ensure fairness and financial stability, Nandalal established a clear framework of rules and standardised payment rates for different categories of work. Fresco designers were granted the highest remuneration, sculptors received thirty-five percent of the order, and each artist was assured a minimum monthly income of Rs. 100 and thirteen per cent of total earnings were reserved for a central trust fund to secure the collective's future needs. Artisans from Karusangha showcased

and sold their handcrafted works at the stalls of the Satui Poush or village-style fairs held in Santiniketan. These fairs became important centers for cultural interaction and for putting Tagore's vision into practice.[14]

After the 1930s, when Gandhiji started his Dandi Avijan , Pravatmohan Bandhyopadhyay leave Santiniketan to take part in Freedom movement. Nandalal gave him his blessings for taking that decision also conveyed his wish to participate in that. Masuji also leave the place for the same purpose. Pravatmohan Bandhyopadhyay states that time, Karusangha could not maintain itself because there was a gradual decline in morale and the willingness to work selflessly for the collective good. Outside orders nearly stopped, and the monthly income fell below one hundred rupees. [15]

Among the members, Ramkinkar baij benefited the most from Karusangha at the time. Yet, financial necessity forced him to take a teaching position at New Model School in Delhi for six months at a salary of Rs 150, though he eventually returned to Santiniketan dissatisfied. In the 1930s, Nandalal wrote a letter to Pravatmohan from which we can get to know about the condition of Karusangha. In the letter, he stated that,

Kinkar's payment was not released by Ardhendu Babu. He went to collect that but returned with humiliation. Pravatmohan's pictures had not been traced. Out of the Rs 200 due from Gurusaday Dutta's book *Chander Buri*, which carried some excellent illustrations by Ramkinkar Baij and was very rare, only half of the amount had been released. Nandalal also sent another letter for this reason. Masoji was keeping the accounts, and they were clear. He also states in the letter that Karusangha was not dead, it will die with him. He didn't know what God planned for Karusangha, but he still had hope. Anatomy classes were continuing regularly, though they felt a bit dull. Pravatmohan know well that the responsibility of Karusangha's work was entrusted to certain members. Nandalal was keeping the lamp burning. Occasionally, he published advertisements; the Oriental Art Society Journal had also carried a full page. He was still trying to organise fresco work, asking several people to make arrangements for the holidays. But he was tired, perhaps for his age- for him life felt strangely fatigued, enthusiasm was not the same. [16]

Gradually, orders stopped coming altogether, and members began drifting away. Masuji and Indusudha Ghosh took up positions at Silpa Sadan in Santiniketan, while Binode Behari moved to Ahmedabad to work as a designer at a textile mill with a salary of Rs 100. Eventually, Karusangha ceased functioning despite Nandalal's tireless effort.[17]

In *Bharatshilpi Nandalal*, we came across a new and intriguing narrative about the dissolution of Karusangha. The reliability of this account, however, had been questioned by many. In 1931, to mark Rabindranath Tagore's birth anniversary, an exhibition of Kala Bhavan's work was organised at Calcutta Town Hall. Nandalal sent some craftwork their behalf of Karusangha for displaying. But it was unfortunate that the Secretary of Visva Bharati dismissed them as private work and excluded them from the exhibition. This act profoundly hurt Nandalal so much that his response was not merely emotional; it reflected a principled stance on the independence of artistic and craft-based initiatives. He even contemplated leaving Kala Bhavana. At this point, Rabindranath's intervention was significant. He reassured Nandalal of his support, encouraged the continuation of Karusangha's work and even promised to provide land for its development. Yet the institutional pressure persisted because later that year, a formal notice from Uttarayan requiring Nandalal to take on extra work, which made him realise that Karusangha's autonomy was increasingly under threat. That's why Nandalal decided to dissolve Karusangha and stated, "My plan for Karusangha (an artist's association) was shattered. Karusangha is dead".[18]

Here, the question arises: if Karusangha truly ceased to exist, then why did Nandalal write in 1934 that Karusangha was not dead? The authenticity of the letter could not be doubted because it was handwritten by Nandalal himself and dated 1934. It is challenging to determine

whether Visva Bharati's bureaucratic system harboured any negative attitudes towards Karusangha.[19] It can be said that Karusangha was not just a craft guild but an experiment in creating a shared artistic economy within the Santiniketan environment. It became clear that its decline was gradual rather than sudden, which was shaped by shrinking membership, the absence of capable leadership, and perhaps a lack of institutional alignment with Nandalal's cooperative model of craft practice.

But later, it can be said that Karusangha was not dead, and Nandalal himself had witnessed that. With the effort of his daughter Yamuna Sen, and Abanindranath Tagore's Grand granddaughter-in-law Arundhati Thakur, Karusangha was revived in a new form in the 1960s. Nandalal's two daughters Gauri Bhanja and Yamuna Sen, along with their students, opened a workshop in Karusandha at Taldhwaj. Through these initiatives, several ashram residents, housewives and young women from nearly every village engaged in Batik work, embroidery, leather painting, woollen work and creating various decorative objects. The objects they created, whether for household use or personal adornment, reflected the Santiniketan ideal of uniting aesthetic refinement with everyday life. [20]

Comprising mainly former students of Kala Bhavana, Karu Sangha specialised in commissioned artworks and handcrafted items such as sarees, scarves, dupattas, wall hangings and other sustainable textiles featuring Batik, tie-dye, and Kantha embroidery. Among its various crafts, Batik became the most prominent, overseen by Nandalal's daughters Gauri Bhanja and Jamuna Sen. The organisation fostered a collaborative and creative environment, where women of different ages participated in every stage of the process- from conceptualising designs to dyeing and finishing. [21]

This endeavour simultaneously fulfilled a dual purpose; it nurtured artistic sensibilities while also providing women with an avenue for economic self-reliance. Although the initiative taken by them did not pursue the more ambitious aspects of Nandalal's vision, such as the creation of an artist's association, book design, printing projects or widespread outreach, it nevertheless preserved an essential component of his mission; the dignified integration of craft into life. The continued use of Karusangha's original emblem and name, designed by Nandalal, symbolically maintained continuity with its foundational ideals.

It is also very significant that Arundhati Thakur's residence in the United States extended Karusangha's reach beyond the Indian subcontinent. Through her efforts, its cottage industries and craft products entered an international circuit. Batik Sarees, blouses, leather bags, satchels, purses were not only popular among the Indian diaspora but were also embraced by Western women who purchased them at premium prices and wore them with pride. This transnational acceptance points to the global resonance of Santiniketan's aesthetic philosophy, demonstrating how a creative guild could simultaneously function as a site of cultural diplomacy and a vehicle for economic empowerment.

Those who were attached with the Karusangha was Arundhati Tagore, Smt.Chobi Sanyal (Chakraborty), Smt. Gouri Ghosh, Smt. Mina Mukhopadhyay, Smt. Indrani Bhattacharya. In the book published on the occasion of Karusangha's exhibition in Kolkata in 1968, Benodebehari Mukherjee wrote,

Years later, in 1961, the Sangha was revived by some women workers under the leadership of Smt. Jamuna Sen. He also said that –A speciality that the Sangha enjoys is that it remains business like, but has not been commercialized.[22] The Karusangha of 1930 had been short lived. Many years after the discontinuation, a new Karusangha emerged –this time born spontaneously out of the shared excitement and joy of creativity fine handicrafted objects and selling them freely in the stalls during the fair. The new initiative was not directly dependent on the ideals or plans of the previous Karusangha, but Tal Dhwaj remains a lively creative hub where women of various ages engage in productive artistic work. The symbolic link to Nandalal Bose's legacy was maintained through the continued use of the original Karusangha

seal, albeit with minor modifications to it design. Significantly the name of the organisation remain the same as previous Karusangha. Only the form had been changed. The earlier vision of an artist's association was transformed into a women Artists' Association, Santiniketan.

Conclusion:

Karusangha's journey can be seen as a tapestry woven across decades-threads of memory, labor and imagination crossing and re-crossing to create something both beautiful and enduring. What began in 1930s as Nandalal Bose's experiment was like the planting of seed. Karusangha's story one of resilience, reinvention, and quiet cultural revolution. It is Nandalal Bose's visionary attempt to integrate craft, livelihood and aesthetic education into the life of Santiniketan eventually found a renewed expression in the women led revival of the 1960s. The second phase, spearheaded by Jamuna Sen, Gauri Bhanja and Arundhati Thakur, transformed Karusangha from a short lived experiment into a living, breathing collective that empowered women, connected village communities and carried the ethos of Santiniketan beyond India's Border. Karusangha, Nandalal Bose's bold experiment, was like the planting a seed of cultural independency, a vision of art and craft working hand in hand, shaping not just objects but the very texture of everyday life.

In the broader context of Bengal's 20th-century cultural history, Karusangha stands as a microcosm of a larger movement that sought to reconcile tradition with modernity. Its shift from a teacher-guided initiative to a women-driven association reflects both the democratisation of art making and the increasing agency of women in post-Independence India. Today, Karusangha's legacy endures not merely in the object it produced but in the model it set for how creative practice can foster community, sustain livelihoods and project a distinct cultural identity- locally and also globally.

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