159th birth anniversary of Gurudev - All about Rabindranath Tagore

Context

National Gallery of Modern Art will organise the Virtual Tour titled “Gurudev – Journey of the Maestro through his visual vocabulary” from 7th May 2020 to commemorate the 159th birth anniversary of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore.

Modern art of the Gurudev

- Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), popularly known as ‘Gurudev’, was born in an affluent family. The maestro was fascinated by the worlds of literature, art, music and dance at an early age. In 1913, he became the first Indian to receive a Nobel Prize in Literature for his novel ‘Geetanjali’.
- He also wrote the National Anthems of India and Bangladesh. He left his imprint on art and played a role in transforming its practices and ushering into modernism.
- Rabindranath Tagore was primarily known as a writer, poet, playwright, philosopher and aesthetcian, music composer and choreographer, founder of a unique educational institution - Visva- Bharati and a painter. Tagore's emergence as a painter began in 1928 when he was 67 years old.
- For him, it was as an extension to his poetic consciousness. Beginning with scratching and erasures on the pages of his manuscripts during the mid-20s of the 20th Century, he slowly moved to portraying independent images.
- Between 1928 and 1940, Rabindranath painted more than 2000 images. He never gave any title to his paintings. Fed by memories and the subconscious, Rabindranath's art was spontaneous and dramatic. His images did not represent the phenomenal world but an interior reality.
- His work of art were first exhibited in Paris in 1930 and then across Europe and America. Henceforth they gained international recognition. Rabindranath veered towards abstraction in his figuration. His works depict a great sense of fantasy, rhythm and vitality.
- A powerful imagination added an enigmatic strangeness and a sense of depth to his works. One is overwhelmed by the awe-inspiring figures of birds and humans and semi-abstract forms. The energy of his works is counterbalanced by a cool precision and lyricism.
- Tagore celebrated creative freedom in his technique; he never hesitated to daub coloured ink on paper to give life to his subjects. His drawings and ink paintings are freely executed with brushes, rags, cotton-wool and even his fingers.
- For Tagore, art was the bridge that connected the individual with the world. Being the modernist he was; Tagore completely belonged to the world of his time particularly in the realm of art. Expressionism in European art and the primitive art of ancient cultures inspired him. Fantasy, wild imagination and an innate feel for the absurd gave a distinctive character to his visual language. His works have been an inspiration to the artists in India as well as across the world.

Rabindranath Tagore’s role in the freedom struggle

India’s National Movement for freedom was accompanied by a large wave of social, educational and economic awareness throughout the nation. Tagore, one of the foremost thinkers in the country at the time spent time in building educational infrastructure. A man of true
talent, his contribution to the freedom movement is significant.

Following are the events that are evident in showing his contributions to the freedom struggle;

His role during Bengal partition:

In 1904, the Viceroy of India Lord Curzon announced that the Bengal providence would be divided into two parts. The British government was worried about the social integrity among different communities in Bengal and wanted to divide and rule.

During this time Rabindranath Tagore wrote the song Banglar Mati Banglar Jol (Soil of Bengal, Water of Bengal) to unite the Bengali population. He started the Rakhi Utsav where people from Hindu and Muslim communities tied colourful threads on each other’s wrists. In 1911, the two parts of Bengal were reunited.

Literary works as weapons:

Tagore, unlike most of the other freedom fighters of his time, exposed the depravity of the British rule by chronicling all his adversities with British imperialism through poetry and literary works. He wrote most of his pieces in his mother tongue, Bengali, to be later translated to cater to his vast audience. He used his literature as mobilization for political and social reform, hence allowing other nations to be aware and further apply international pressure to Britain to be accountable for its actions. He documented everything that would expose Britain’s true intentions in India.

Role in Jalianawalabagh:

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre even in its centenary year brings out the same vivid experience of trauma felt on April 13, 1919. The incident completely altered the political scenario and composition of India fighting against the British government. The event caused many moderate Indians loyal to the British rule to abandon their loyalty to embrace nationalist values and grow distrustful of British. Many freedom fighters and political leaders were influenced by the incident too. Tagore’s actions against the cruel act also awakened the non-violent stand against the colonial rule.

Tagore during the time of the massacre was ‘Sir’ Rabindranath Tagore (knighthood conferred in 1915) and had been a Nobel Laureate for six years. On receiving the news about Jallianwala Bagh, he tried to arrange a protest in Calcutta (now Kolkata) and finally denounced the knighthood as an act of protest with a repudiation letter to Viceroy Lord Chelmsford dated May 30, 1919.

His views on education

- As one of the earliest educators to think in terms of the global village, Rabindranath Tagore’s educational model has a unique sensitivity and aptness for education within multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-cultural situations, amidst conditions of acknowledged economic discrepancy and political imbalance.
- Rabindranath did not write a central educational treatise, and his ideas must be gleaned through his various writings and educational experiments at Santiniketan In general, he
envisioned an education that was deeply rooted in one’s immediate surroundings but connected to the cultures of the wider world, predicated upon pleasurable learning and individualized to the personality of the child.

- He felt that a **curriculum should revolve organically around nature** with classes held in the open air under the trees to provide for a spontaneous appreciation of the fluidity of the plant and animal kingdoms, and seasonal changes.
- In Tagore’s philosophy of education, the aesthetic development of the senses was as important as the intellectual—if not more so—and music, literature, art, dance and drama were given great prominence in the daily life of the school.
- In keeping with his **theory of subconscious learning**, Rabindranath **never talked or wrote down to the students**, but rather involved them with whatever he was writing or composing.
- In terms of curriculum, he advocated a different emphasis in teaching. Rather than studying national cultures for the wars won and cultural dominance imposed, he advocated a teaching system that analyzed history and culture for the progress that had been made in breaking down social and religious barriers.
- Tagore’s educational efforts were ground-breaking in many areas. He was one of the first in India to argue for a **humane educational system** that was in touch with the environment and aimed at the overall development of the personality. **Santiniketan became a model for vernacular instruction** and the **development of Bengali textbooks**; as well, it offered one of the **earliest coeducational programs in South Asia.**
- One characteristic that sets Rabindranath’s educational theory apart is his approach to education as a poet. At Santiniketan, he stated, his goal was to create a poem ‘in a medium other than words.'