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NICHOLAS ROERICH - THE MISSIONARY OF CULTURE

by

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Nationalism is a virus disease. It spreads at an alarming rate through the communicable media of the newspapers, radio and television. A nation suffering from it, gets high temperature, loses its normal gravity and feels giddy. It always feels injured at the slightest neglect or casual comment from others.

United Nations charter on human rights opens with a sterling statement - Wars begin in the minds of men, and it is in the minds of men that we will have to build the bastions of peace.

Two decades before United Nations came into being as a world organisation, we come across a very pioneering vision of Roerich, by which he strove to bring many nations of the world together into a single purpose of saving the art treasures. This consensus is now famous and known as the 'Roerich Pact'. Roerich had seen the holocaust of the first world war, and later, the devastation during the struggles of Russian revolution. He had seen with his own eyes that wanton destruction of beautiful churches, art museums, sculptures, libraries, ancient universities and monasteries. His sensitive mind, alert to the dangers of nationalism, exhorted with all the force at his command, that the values of culture, the voice of art and architecture were priceless treasures of mankind. A Russian Ikon, the Milanese Church-wall with 'The last supper' of Leonardo or Temples of Horiyuji were blessings of the spirit that ennobled man's heritage and gave him the faith in his own unknown powers. Did we not listen to the voice of 'emerveillment' of wonder and awe that was carved in the copper inscription by the Master Sthapati of Ellora? This anonymous grand master of the eighth century ordered the scribe to carve for the posterity following words "Verily this (stupendous structure) was not of my doing! (meaning some divine inspiration was at work and the Sthapati lay no claim for its superhuman excellence)".

Roerich's call for an inter-state pact to revere cultural monuments and keep them out of bounds for the warring hordes is, therefore, a significant achievement. As an artist of the Himalayas, he had felt within himself the ripening essence of aesthetic sensibility. The sheer heights of the peaks and dizzy depths of the valleys, were seen by him becoming enigmatic, alive with the shifting lights of morning and evening sun. In the midst of majestic mountains he had many occasions to measure the physical insignificance of man. He had also seen that it was only man that stood as a glory to the creation of the planet called Earth. He travelled far and wide and discovered for himself that man was a natural friend of man, that the selfish will to power and rule was the main cause for unhappiness and misery that prevailed around us. His prayer to mankind to respect itself by taking care of its treasures is, therefore, extremely important. It would be interesting here to analyse the role of art in the promotion of human welfare as understood by Roerich.

The works of art - the term includes all such expressions of creativity such as paintings, sculptures, architecture, dance, music, poetry and literature - are an attempt of our mind to locate and give voice to a sense of order. For an untutored primitive, the universe around him is an image of confusion. Animals roar, birds hop around to rob him of his food, the sky showers rain and the sun burns his cheeks. The vegetation is dangerously overgrown hiding lurking ferocity. In this wilderness, he discovers a form of a bull or a horse on the cave walls of his hideout, or finds a rhythm in the regular sound of his stone axe.

He accentuates the shape of a bull or a horse with little line or smear of colour. The simulation of form gives him a feeling of ecstasy. Similarly the beat of his axe makes him attentive to the intervals between the beats. He varies them a little and repeats them to the rhythms that pulsate in his blood. Again he attains ecstasy; he had never felt such an elation earlier. The confusion around him starts to get sorted out. He imagines forms, rhythms and songs that come to him unbidden and make him restless and happy. He works out his premonitions, and slowly a quality of order, of sanity and of peace descends on him.

Art (he thus discovers unconsciously) grows in him a sense of proportion, of balance, of harmony of order and finally a vision of reality. In this world of unknown quality and quantity he superimposes his own frame of reference. He discovers his ground and his bedrock of existence. Art to him, thus is a release from the prisonership of the unknown.

Roerich could see with his penetrating vision that man need not feel condemned for a life sentence. He knew that the key to this prison cell was in the mind of man, he could release himself with the grace and benediction of his art.

Roerich's another significant contribution in the cause of world unity and harmony, was his design of the banner of peace. In this design, a mighty flag unrolls like the bursting onrush of an ocean wave. On one side we read the words "Pax cultura", I think it is a beautiful conception - elegantly worked out. Here again we find the passionate missionary of culture, marching ahead with his full blast let loose on the fortresses of parochialism and violence.

While unfurling the benign banner of peace this missionary raised his voice to say "Let there resound once again the mighty prayer of peace of the entire world. As the Redcross affirms physical health, so may the banner of peace establish and affirm the spiritual health of mankind".

In this message, Roerich combines his faith in Art and Culture with his conviction in world peace. He states that the spiritual health of mankind is at stake and it is in the minds of man that we should revive the streams of sanity and mental wellbeing. How does a work of art, a piece of poetry, a drama or a musical symphony achieve this essential task?

To understand this does not need any expert study of psychology or cybernetics. Our brain-cells are on constant alert and the everyday events give these cells, vibrations that are very often beyond the level of tolerance. Selfish demands, frustrations that counter these demands and consequent tensions are built up and our brain-cells reach a stage of fatigue. Works of art appear to function

like a magnet that brings order into the vast confusion of iron filings. The brain cells temporarily abandon their earlier agitation and attain harmonious movements. Now cells do not clash : they dance to a given rhythm of a work of art. These rhythms elevate our mind and give it a health which can be justly called spiritual. Here I have limited my observations to the influences Roerich exercised on the permeation of cultural climate for the welfare of mankind. His organisational abilities must have been stupendous. From New York, London, Paris to Allahabad and Varanasi, centres and museums came into being, many of which were his personal contributions. He believed in spreading the message of art to the remotest corner of human civilization. He had that firm conviction which succeeded against odds of misunderstandings, adversities and ideological opposition. It appeared as though he had forged himself in a stronger steel as he faced handicaps and blockades towards his destined purpose.

When we come to estimate his art, we will have to admit that he is an unusual happening. European art of the 19th century (he was born in 1874) in its closing decades was passing through one of the most swift and dramatic transitions in the history of art. We remember that his years of early youth witnessed the emergence of the Impressionists and the Post-Impressionists. But none of these movements have left any perceptible mark on his artistic endeavour, in the last decade of the last century, we notice the appearance of the symbolists like Odilon Redon, Gauguin. Later the Fauvists took over the wave. The Symbolists were not much concerned with the vision and the outer glory of light. They, on the contrary, searched for images out of their **mythological** memories and psychological response to these. The Fauvists in their turn picked up the severe sharp notes of their palette and created a pictorial world tuned to the high key. If my guess is right, I think Roerich owes his mystical, myth-making strain to the Symbolists and his high pitch of tonal values to the Fauvists. But then these are just contributing factors. His natural tendency was towards creating harmony. In his hands Fauvism seems to have lost its bite and had grown a look of high ecstasy. The **towering** mountains with their peaks catching the most unimaginable hues, the blues of the skies held into the cup of towering rocks, the pearly grey-blues of the all pervading mists, were knit in a melodic sequence. In the ultimate analysis Roerich created works which were altogether different either from the

western mainstream of art or from the oriental art. He may not appear in the history books of art as a daring originator like Picasso, or as a great painter of sensitive imagination like Paul Klee, or like Abanindranath and Nandalal who created a visual language for the renaissance India. He none-the-less will be remembered as a mystic lover of nature, who had given up the scientific civilization and its gadgetry to seek the quiet altitudes of Naggar.

Here, it will be known for generations to come, that there lived a Patriarch, a mystic, a lover of nature and a great visionary who cared for cultural heritage, peace and goodwill to mankind.
