

## PANDURANG KHANKHOJE

Today in the first decade of the Twenty-first Century to write about events that occurred in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century is like going back into time. The 'Fin de Siecle', the end of history as it was known then, presaged an era that was to bring technology into warfare, it was an epoch that would change the world as it was known then.

Pandurang Khankhoje was born in 1886 in British colonial India, the son of a 'Marathi Vakil' a petition writer in the courts of law, and the grandson of a revolutionary who fought in 1857. Born in a Brahmin family that treasured learning above all else; as a little boy Pandurang was mentored by his grandfather, he was taught by stories and anecdotes to recognize the evils of colonial rule, the harshness and insensitivity of the British ruler towards the common people: to all those who would not conform or change their ways to suit the ruler. The great famine of Marathwada in 1897 left a deep mark on Khankhoje, thousands of people died due to the failure of the Monsoon as well as the engineered administrative breakdown of the British, in front of this terrible man made tragedy. Khankhoje had organized a band of boy volunteers to help the affected people, a drop in the ocean perhaps, but hunger, death, and drought, were to leave an indelible impression, an impression that was to determine his choice of future career.

As a schoolboy he became an ardent admirer of the French Revolution, of the American War of Independence. In those days Garibaldi and Massini were greatly admired by Indian intellectuals, they became the heroes of a young group led by him; the young student was on the way of becoming a revolutionary, a student leader, and by the time he was seventeen years old the police had warned his parents of his so called seditious activities. The world moves on the dreams of great dreamers and the Independence of India became an inspired aspiration that was to lead young Khankhoje to many parts of the world in a remarkable journey: Japan, USA, Turkey, Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, Baluchistan and finally Afghanistan.

Fuelled by this dream, as soon as he completed his schooling, he boldly went to meet his Guru, Lokmanya Tilak, the first Indian to proclaim 'Swaraj is my birthright', the first Indian thinker to demand complete Independence. India was to gain her independence not only many years later but also after two world shattering world wars; independence, which was gained ultimately, by the non-violence movement of Mahatma Gandhi. Freedom from colonialism cannot be achieved in days or even months, perhaps even in years; it can be said that the foundations and mental preparation of the people took decades. Some historians say it all started in 1857 and call it the First War of Independence, many other movements and violence were to erupt before it all ended in 1947. Khankhoje was to spearhead one of these movements: The Ghadar.

Tilak advised the young man, bent on bringing armed struggle to India, to go to Japan. Asia was riding high on the victory of the Japanese Imperial Navy over the Russian Imperial navy. The humiliation of a western power by Asians was completely unprecedented. This was thought to be the best place to begin his odyssey and quest for independence.

In Japan Indian students met Count Okuma the then Prime Minister, who promised support and sympathy, but nothing more. Okuma's hands were tied due to

political treaties with Britain. Khankhoje destitute and practically starving then met his friends the exiled Chinese revolutionaries of Dr Sun Yat Sen with whom he had traveled on the way to Japan; here he was promised financial help and instruction on the military arts, as well as the handling of weapons, in exchange for English lessons. This resulted in a momentous meeting with the great leader. Dr Sun very encouragingly praised the quest for independence but also asked Khankhoje about his plans after gaining independence. Comparing China and India he spoke at length about the famines that both countries faced and the need for scientific modern agriculture. Leaders have great responsibilities and feeding the people was one of the most important parameters of good governance. This amazing experience of a conversation with one of the great men of that day had a profound effect on the young man and even in his old age Khankhoje would speak with reverence about Dr Sun.

The world was very different in those days and passports were not very common, people traveled on the strength of letters of permit, and sailor passes and what have you. Khankhoje had left India without any papers or permits, running away from the colonial police, traveling as a labourer, cleaning decks or even as a personal servant to African sailors. Eating whatever he was offered and abandoning all his puritanical, Brahminical customs; as a person, he was evolving from a small middle class boy and was just beginning to understand the political and financial forces that move the world. For him, the only thing that mattered was India's independence and freedom from the colonial yoke. He was beginning to learn the very bitter lesson that simple idealism was not going to take him very far, that money and education were needed to foment revolutions. Learning from the Chinese, he realized that just a burning ideal and a strong determination were not enough, that an organization, a structured body of dedicated people were very important to succeed.

Dejected and almost defeated he may have contemplated turning back, he had endured too many privations during his year in Japan, but in the end his will to succeed in his endeavour and an announcement in the newspapers asking for workers to rebuild San Francisco after the earthquake, stirred him on. With the help of his Chinese friends he traveled steered in the hold of a ship carrying workers to San Francisco.

Mingling in a crowd of Chinese, rejected for all construction work due to his poor physique, he went through the gamut of experience an unskilled immigrant in America experiences. Working as a waiter, a cleaner, a dishwasher, he finally settled down to work as a hospital attendant: a glorified name for a 'jack of all trades' dealing with all the blood, detritus and dirt, also coping with all the attending horrors of hospitals in those days.

Having saved enough money for his college fees he enrolled in Berkeley University and resumed the pursuit of his dream. He formed a group of like minded students and started lecturing Indian immigrant workers about the need for India to be free from the British. He and his friends founded the India Independence league. He was back in harness, working and studying, hardly sleeping, going round meeting Indians.

After a year in Berkeley he enrolled in the Mount Tamalpais Military Academy, closer now in his mind to the desire to lead an armed struggle for freedom.

. The early twentieth century had changed the aspirations of many of the people of the world. Imperialism was dying a slow death Many Latin American countries had fought and become independent from Spain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Irish were fighting

for freedom from the Crown; Mount Tamalpais was run by retired Irish Army officers who sponsored Khankhoje. He was again cleaning stables and bathrooms and working for his living, learning as he went the art of warfare, military tactics and other subjects.

The Mexican revolution of 1910 was raging and Khankhoje, often confused as a Mexican, made friends with many Mexican revolutionaries and the Mexican people while working on the railway tracks. Wanting to train with the Mexicans he had to be dissuaded, as the Mexican revolution was a grim and a very serious deadly affair. Here he made long lasting friendships that lasted till the end of his days.

He graduated in 1910 at the height of the Mexican Revolution; the world was moving on, the philosophy of governance was undergoing a deep change, dictatorships were being overthrown and democracy was gaining ground, the colonized world was getting restive and rebellious. The stage was set; for Khankhoje, the real business of establishing an armed struggle for freedom from colonialism had to begin.

Khankhoje an idealist to the core had also a pragmatic approach and he set out to explore the areas that had the maximum Indian workers. He walked, he jumped goods trains and traveled by train wherever he could afford. Working here and there, on the way to finally arrive at Portland Oregon to work in a Lumber Mill; addressing Indian labourers, motivating them to work for Indian Independence. It was a grueling job for a young man like Khankhoje, undaunted he would learn to lift logs and fetch and carry thus establishing a rapport with the workers, lecturing while working and speaking of his dreams of self determination. Working on Sundays he would speak in the Sikh Gurudwara where finally an organization was formed with Sohan Singh Bakhna as the Secretary and Pandit Kashiram, the Mill manager, as treasurer. By the end of the year they had more than five thousand volunteers.

Lala Har Dayal an eminent Indian intellectual teaching in Stanford University was inducted into the movement. He would unite the various groups and start a political campaign of propaganda, publishing a newspaper printing patriotic songs and articles in the various vernacular languages of India. This was the nucleus from which the Ghadar Party would emerge, all staunch patriots and determined revolutionaries. Har Dayal a brilliant orator and near genius, set out to procure arms and ammunition for the rebels, making an alliance with the Germans who were secretly preparing to wage war; this was the first ever liberation movement from foreign colonialism planned abroad by any nation, and significantly for India. Prosperous Indian migrants, with much to lose, with bold determination planned to raid India militarily and fight for their rights.

Khankhoje as a student activist had enrolled in Portland University to acquire a degree in the science of agriculture looking forward to the future as advised by the Chinese revolutionary Dr Sun. Hardly sleeping, studying and working he also dedicated all his free time to the Ghadar movement. He went on to study in Washington State University acquiring a master's degree and later enrolled for a PhD programme till the First World War overtook him. By his own admission he never slept more than three hours, packing his day with work and revolutionary activities.

Khankhoje had organized a militant group consisting of retired ex-servicemen, making use of his recently gained military expertise in Mount Tamalpais. He trained his volunteers in the farmlands belonging to a prosperous Sikh farmer, explosives and weapon training, as well as stealth attacks were planned. While in San Francisco he had

kept in touch with the Chinese and discussed ways and means to foment a revolution. The Ghadrites intended to raid Indian police establishments, attack armouries and create havoc in general while the British were engaged in fighting war elsewhere.

Eagerly the volunteers set out to return to India. Their leader Har Dayal had been arrested and had escaped to Switzerland. They were left headless and confused.

It was 1914; the world would experience a cataclysmic war, a war that would decimate young men of many countries, a war that would change all ideas of warfare and the ethics of war. The volunteers charged with idealism and patriotic fervour, were ready to move in and foment trouble in India. It was a period of feverish activity and mass mobilization.

Khankhoje desperate to join his companions, found much to his chagrin that without a passport he was courting arrest before his journey started. Things had changed, the world was at war. Accidentally learning that the Germans were going to have an important meeting with Indian activists in Constantinople, he set out in a tramp steamer to join them. Getting forged Persian papers from a friend he set out on his mission. He had dreamt of entering India and fomenting revolution by stealthily subverting Indian troops at the Indo Afghanistan border. Armed with a false Persian passport he entered the most audacious enterprise of his life.

The Germans had planned three expeditions to Afghanistan, Iran and Baluchistan and to open up a third front in the Middle East, to cut out supplies of oil and to divert British forces and weaken their counter offensive. The German Kaiser had no intentions of helping the Indians to attain independence; their intention was merely to divert and distract. Eventually Khankhoje joined the expedition led by Wilhelm Wassmuss, the 'German Lawrence of Arabia;' this colourful character in the true tradition of Lawrence led many a skirmish against the British disguised as a Persian. Khankhoje was in his elements fighting the British and slowly building an army of recruits to enter India via Indian Baluchistan. He was waiting for the arms promised by the Germans as well as a shipload of volunteers from America. Unfortunately the world at war was in a state of confusion and things did not go as planned, the arms were captured, and the fighting men never arrived. Many a battle was fought while marching towards his goal, Indian Baluchistan. Tragically Khankhoje kept on waiting and fighting desperately, not knowing what had happened, till he was wounded in a battle against Brig General Sir Percy Sykes. Almost losing his life, depressed and suicidal he took shelter with the Kashghai tribes who had befriended him. It took him a year to recover from his wounds and to regain his spirits to fight again.

In the meanwhile the quixotic war launched by the Ghadar volunteers in India ended in the ignominy of criminal trials, often jailed as criminals and executed as terrorists. The brave volunteers had hoped to foment a revolution but the Indian people were not ready for insurrection. Thousands of Indian soldiers had been recruited to fight in the First World War and loyalties were divided. It all ended, but not before the British Indian Government launched a series of cruel reprisals.

Khankhoje restless and frustrated decided to return to India to meet his Guru Lokmanya Tilak, disguised as a secretary to a Persian Prince, he audaciously returned to India. Tilak was seriously ill; he upbraided Khankhoje and asked him to return to Europe as his life was in grave danger. Chased by the secret service he quickly returned to Persia.

After facing this serious disappointment, he decided to join the mainstream of the Indian Independence movement. He did not want to give up, so he went to Paris where he met Madame Bhikaji Cama, a Parsi patriot, who directed him to Germany. Virendranath Chattopadhyaya brother of the renowned Indian poet Sarojini Naidu, Chatto, as he was affectionately called, was in Berlin; he had formed a group of Indians intent to fight for Independence. Khankhoje was back in his elements.

The Russian revolution had taken place and the Czar and his family had been executed. Vladimir Lenin had set up the Comintern, inspired by all this, the Indians decided to ask Lenin for help. It was a futile attempt to meet the great man as the Indian delegation was denied access to Lenin; only Khankhoje met him. Lenin singled him out, as the Russian leader wanted to learn about the plight of the Indian farmer and the Persian democratic movement. They spoke at great length; the main emphasis of the Russians was to bring Communism to India and not democracy and freedom from colonial rule. Another Indian delegation led by M.N.Roy, were also present at that time. They were very much in favour with the political regime as they were committed Communists.

Khankhoje and his friends returned dejected and defeated. According to the group led by Chatto and Khankhoje, India was not ready for communism.

Germany was a defeated nation, people were starving and unemployment was rampant, Khankhoje, in dire straits, feared the British secret service and their attempts to eliminate Indian revolutionaries one way or another. God only knows how and in what manner he finally landed in Mexico, somewhere around 1924. He never wrote about it, probably trying to efface this dark period of his life from his memory.

It was probably very painful for him to recount the problems and vicissitudes that he encountered when he illegally entered Mexico. He never spoke about the days when he practically starved and grew vegetables in Xochimilco, a famous tourist attraction near Mexico City. He had reconciled himself to the fact that his revolutionary life had ended and now he had to fight for survival. He set about to find his old revolutionary friends from the days of the Mexican uprising. Fortunately one of them, Don Ramon P. De Negri, had become Minister for Agriculture; another was Senator Monzon who also promised to help him in his difficulties. After dealing with the Mexican bureaucracy Khankhoje was finally appointed Professor in the Chapingo Agricultural School, now a University. He had the American credentials, but no Spanish to speak of; a linguist at heart he soon was teaching by 'hands on' education and a smattering of pidgin Spanish.

Mexico after the revolution was intellectually a very exciting and dynamic place to live in; after years of colonial rule, and then a brief spell of Hapsburg domination by Emperor Maximilian, and thirty years of the dictatorial rule of Porfirio Diaz, that ended in a cruel, bloody and violent revolution. Mexico had entered a transformative phase. The mood of the Agrarian Revolution of Emiliano Zapata still persisted even after his death. The Mexican farmer, the soldier and the industrial labourer, the oppression of the masses by the rich and influential, became main themes of Mexican art.

The new Minister for education, Jose Vasoncelos named 'The Mexican Eagle' was an erudite man, an intellectual who had developed a taste for oriental philosophy and Yoga; a man of many parts who encouraged the popular arts, built schools and fought

illiteracy. He commissioned Diego Rivera to paint a series of murals in the Ministry of education and the chapel of Chapingo.

Diego Rivera, the most famous Mexican muralist, had returned after a decade in Europe; a decade where he met and associated with the best European artists. After a surfeit of Europe and its art, Rivera, returned to Mexico and saw his own world with new eyes. Determined to start a school of Mexican painting, using the amalgam of the Spanish influence and the Mexican indigenous art, he resurrected the ancient Aztec art of mural decoration, transforming it into an art form that transcended Mexican history, its nationhood and its people, perpetuating Mexico in glorious art.

These were indeed very exciting times; Mexico was in the midst of an explosion of art and liberal politics. Khankhoje was again in the vortex of a different kind of revolution. Saddened by his failure to bring independence to India he took to the Mexican people as his own, taking them to his heart and wanting to do for them what he could not do for India. The simplicity of the Mexican Indian, his acceptance of fate and a certain darkness of thought, so similar to the Indian tribal, reminded him of India. He was determined to work for them and improve their life.

He set out to study Maize, maize that has a mystical quality for Mexicans and is the food of the common people; he worked on developing new varieties of corn. High yielding corn that magically opened up like a pomegranate, with grains in and out. He set out to study wheat, with particular attention to drought resisting wheat and again high yielding varieties. Plant genetics became his subject in his endeavour to feed the world.

Tina Modotti now enters this charged scene; she had traveled to Mexico with the famous American photographer Weston who was teaching her photography. Her initial work was taking portraits of society women, a subject which probably bored her, much later she blossomed composing great artistic still life studies: minimalist Calla lilies, a clump of sugar cane, lonely palms, leaves and flowers suddenly bursting into her own art form, exploring the roughened hands of a Mexican farmer, reveling into a sea of hats, tracing the spirit of a Mexican child's sad face. All the time getting more and more involved into the life and poverty of the Mexican farmer.

Weston had made this beautiful and charismatic woman famous by a series of artistic nudes; her energy and beauty amazingly portrayed, in black and white photography typical of Weston. This prompted Rivera into making her his model for the magnificent nude, 'Germination' in the Chapingo murals

Into this molten crucible of ideas of art, science and revolution, it was only right that these three people should meet. Khankhoje used to spend time helping the painter in the grinding and mixing of paints, while engaging in conversation about communism, and his meeting with Lenin. He spoke at length on his ideas to help the Mexican farmer, to teach him better farming methods that led to the foundation, by Khankhoje of The Free Schools of Agriculture; Rivera became deeply involved as a Patron in this enterprise and subsequently thirty free schools were imparting education in several states of Mexico.

The idea was to improve the agricultural farming methods, to teach new techniques to the farmers and region wise decide what was best: coffee plantations in Veracruz, wheat in another state and Maize near Texcoco. The experiments on wheat were a seminal contribution to research and study of better varieties. These studies, many years later, and after much more studies, led to the Green Revolution spearheaded by

Norman Borlaug: a Green revolution that benefited India immensely; in a way fulfilling Khankhoje's dream: Food for the people of India.

Modotti was evolving and becoming a revolutionary at heart, she felt deeply the injustice and inequality experienced by the Mexican indigenous people. She became so involved that she left all her other activities behind. In the official legal documents of the schools Tina Modotti is mentioned as the photographer that recorded the activities therein. She joined Khankhoje in his forays into the farming hinterland of Mexico and soon began to take brilliant photographs for Khankhoje's monographs.

The Origin and Evolution of Maize, that traced the origin of maize from the corn cob to the lowly Teozinte grass, was a brilliant journey in plant genetics, illustrated by the photographs of Modotti. She had the artistic genius to infuse light and life into what would have been stolid scientific records.

The New Varieties of Maize, that showed the multigrain corn that opened like a pomegranate. Modotti in a single brilliant study gives this ear of corn life and a promise to feed the world; allegorically perhaps, nevertheless, a brilliant stark composition.

Her study of the different roots of edible yam has almost the looks of insects from another world. Obviously the artist was deeply moved by Khankhoje's quest to improve the yield of plants to better feed the world. Moving around the countryside she also recorded a way of life that would soon die out in the modern world, the way of life of the small farmer living in his hut, tilling the soil to feed his family. She brought the Mexican ways to a living dimension and recorded for posterity scenes that would soon disappear.

But the most brilliant photograph is that of Khankhoje in his laboratory. A picture that could almost rival a medieval Flemish painter; the starkness of the table with a few specimens, the strength and concentration of the subject illuminated by a ray of sunlight through a window; all this bringing to the fore the emotional impact of food and poverty.

It can be now said that these stark black and white photographs brought a new form of art into the world of photography, it brought social consciousness and melded it into an art form, exploring and crossing new frontiers of art.

There are many other photographs: the geometrical display of corn in the laboratory, catching Rivera sitting in a lighter moment, Khankhoje holding an ear of corn like a 'flambeau' of liberty...Khankhoje being rebuked for putting a serious face in an inconsequential photograph. All these with a back drop of the mystical maize, the high yielding varieties of drought resistant wheat and the better cultivation of Yam, basically the unrefined food of the masses given the importance they deserved.

This series of photographs marks the transition of her art from art for beauty's sake to art for social evolution, to art with a deeper message

Rivera was not untouched by all of this, as he painted Khankhoje in a mural in the Secretariat of Education, "El Pan Nuestro" in almost biblical tone Khankhoje distributing bread to the people of the world. Much later in the famous painting for the Rockefeller Centre, in a detail in one corner, he painted Khankhoje's agricultural studies.

This complete archive of photographs remained in Khankhoje's custody as the artist, Tina Modotti, had to flee Mexico accused of murdering her lover Julio Antonio Mella and many other political intrigues. There is a stark photograph of Mella showing the scars of his wounds, looking almost like a police recording. Those were very difficult times; suspicions and paranoia were rampant in politically unstable Mexico. Tina had become notorious for her so called dubious activities.

Disenchanted with the political scenario in Mexico and the campaign against her, Tina left Mexico to join the Spanish Civil War as an ambulance driver, forsaking photography altogether. She also went to Russia and experimented with Communism and suffered many a tribulation during that regime. Later after many trials, and years of unhappiness she died in Mexico.

Khankhoje remained in Mexico, settled down and became a family man; he lived for thirty years in Mexico. His final return to India in 1955 brought him the joy of stepping on the soil of his own country after independence. The disillusionment, however, of not being able to work for his own people left him very sad. The frustration caused by bureaucratic apathy, even to the extent that on his return his name was still on the proscribed list; had left him jobless and in severe penury. Austere and stoical he did what he could, his agricultural work unrecognized, he set about to look after his family in the best way he could. Slowly withdrawing into his self, reading the Vedas and Indian philosophy at length, he staunchly refused to join politics: passing away in his sleep at the age of 81. In India, he will be remembered for his revolutionary work, and contribution to the Ghadar movement.

Khankhoje might well have been forgotten in Mexico as he had lived, as a quiet, brilliant unassuming man: one of the many unsung heroes of this world, but for this amazing revolutionary woman: Tina Modotti. A woman much before her times, a woman who like a magical catalyst, recorded Khankhoje's work; virtually elevating his work to an art form. These photographs document a very special time, an era of great art and revolution. An era of idealism and social strife, a time which may never come again, but that forever stands encapsulated in her works.