

Celebrating Colours

An interview with Neel Pawan Baruah

by Manish Goswami

His middle name Pawan aptly describes him. Like Pawan, i.e., the wind, he likes to blow free in his own inimitable way, without trodding on the same old beaten path chalked out by the society or following the fixed set of norms imposed by it. He is not a rebel, but a nonconformist who in his own gentle way likes to chart an independent course for himself. He is none other than

Sri Neel Pawan Baruah, one of the noted painters of the Assam.

Not one to be tied down with one particular idea or concept, Neel Pawan has traversed almost the entire range of creative pursuits: from painting, pottery, poetry, mask making, reviving the art of Brindavani Vastra et al.

Whether it is his paintings or work in masks or pottery, it is hard to typecast him to one particular style. "I work spontaneously without any preconceived idea or notion," Neel Pawan said during our conversation at his Sauravnagar residence in the Beltola area of the city.

"My paintings reflect my bohemian approach. I never think of any subject when I start my work on the canvas. Its only after completion I come to know about it." Though most of his works are abstract, they range from the complexities and confusion arising out of modernity to depicting nature in her pristine glory. His love for trees is not only evident in his paintings but also in his residence, which seems to blend with the trees and the foliage.

He is an artist who is always aware of the transitoriness of human life. This feeling comes out vividly in one of his paintings depicting Yama, the Lord of death in Hindu mythology. A unique aspect of Neel Pawan's art is his minuscule sketches on empty matchboxes and cigarette packs with intricate designs and shapes!

On being asked when and why he took to painting, Neel Pawan had an interesting answer. "I became a painter by chance and not by choice, as I had nothing else to do then. I was starting painting when I was about 24 years."

"My dislike for formal education was also responsible for it. After several attempts I finally cleared the matric examination. Working in the fields and social work appealed to me more than college education. Though I didn't enjoy attending classes, I was an avid reader. A book which I read at that time, written by Promothnath Bose, influenced me. There I come to know about Shantiniketan. A paragraph in which he described that the discarded lot of the society goes to Shantiniketan and they get reformed there, inspired me to go there."

"I went to Shantiniketan to pursue a course on agriculture, which was till then my first choice. But at Shantiniketan, when I saw the painting exhibitions, the classes, I decided to join the Kala Bhawan instead."

"In Shantiniketan, which I joined in 1961, again the rigours of formal education didn't appeal to me and I took more time than others to graduate in fine arts. Moreover, there all my classmates were junior to me by five to six years, which also initially posed some adjustment problems for me. After fine arts, I also did a course in glazed pottery at Shree Niketan."

Impressed by his works on pottery, a Jewish friend of Neel Pawan arranged a job for him as a pottery instructor at an institute in England. But instead of joining that institute, on his father's instruction, Neel Pawan joined the **Guwahati Art school** as an art teacher. "At that time the financial condition of the school was so bad that at times the then chowkidar of the school, Triveni Jha, used to borrow money on his own initiative from others to run it."

"Later, I, along with others, formed the **Assam Fine Arts and Crafts Society** in Guwahati in 1971. There we took special interest in teaching art to children."

Apart from paintings, Neel Pawan is also involved in promoting the art of mask making and was instrumental in organising the first ever workshop on traditional mask making in 1982. "From my childhood the masks fascinated me when I saw them being used in bhaonas and plays. We must not let this unique tradition of ours to fade away, but try to preserve and promote it." Neel Pawan said, "the experiences of childhood has a profound influence on my works. The stories of the village folk, the bhaona, theatres in our village near Teak in Jorhat district, the greenery of the fields and forest continues to inspire me. Many years later, once I drew almost a full size painting of a namghar. After its completion, I was amazed that the persons depicted in it exactly resembled the ones whom I had seen in our village namghar when I was a child."

"The stories of the Arabian Nights, specially Sindbad's tales had a profound influence on me. Maybe it made me a sort of bohemian, as I used to do some strange acts like going for very long walks, or going to distant places almost without a penny in my purse. Once while in school, I went off to a nearby hill for farming." Fascinated with chang ghar, house on stilts, Neel Pawan's art school, Basundhara Kala Niketan, at his residence is also a chang ghar, having a natural ambience, surrounded by trees. His own art studio also has thechang ghar effect.

His dislike for formal mode of education remained etched in his psyche. In his art school, he teaches his students in an informal way, doing away with fixed patterns or routine. "I encourage them to improve their paintings and let them do it in their own way."

Can art be taken as a profession in our State? "Yes, why not," he said, "if one has the talent coupled with courage and confidence in oneself, one can easily take up art as a profession. But to take it up as a profession one must be true to his trade and try to improve and take it to a higher level."

Married to the prominent singer of the State, Deepali Borthakur, after she was afflicted by a crippling incurable ailment, Neel Pawan, son of DhvaniKavi Binanda Chandra Baruah, also vents his feelings in the form of poetry. His latest poem composed along with his painting on Kargil, in a very subtle and touching way reflects upon the futility of war, which brings only death and destruction in its wake.

It is this sentiment which keeps him going, expressing his feelings either on canvas, in his clay work or in his poetry.