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Tagore exhibition wins Venice laurels - Paintings at exhibition curated by poet's kin

By Amit Roy
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Sundaram Tagore in Venice

Venice, May 10: An exhibition at the Venice Biennale, which includes paintings by Rabindranath Tagore, is winning high praise from critics and visitors.

The exhibition, *Frontiers Reimagined*, has been curated by Calcutta-born Sundaram Tagore, who has brought together some 70 works of art by 44 artists from 25 countries.

Frontiers Reimagined is located in an elegant 16th-century palace, the Museo di Palazzo Grimani, where the exhibition --- hailed as one of the five best entries this year --- will remain open till November 22.

Sundaram, who was born at 7 Chowringhee Road in 1961 and now owns galleries in New York, Hong Kong and Singapore, acknowledges being "the great-grandson of the fourth brother, Hemendranth Tagore" but does not brag about being a descendant of the poet.

Like his famous ancestor, Sundaram's aim is to demonstrate that art is the common language of humanity and can transcend political and national boundaries.

It is not easy to attract attention at the Venice Biennale, which began in 1895 and is now staging its 56th edition. It has become the world's premier art gathering and routinely attracts hundreds of thousands of critics, museum directors, government representatives and wealthy collectors from across the planet.

Indeed, the sleek yachts of the super-rich can be spotted jostling for berthing space in Venice's crowded marinas.

The Art Newspaper, which is followed by many people in the business, has just published a must-see list: "Five of the best exhibitions around Venice."

"Shows worth checking out beyond the Arsenale and Giardini" include *Frontiers Reimagined*, which counts as high praise indeed for Sundaram and his co-curator, Marius Kwint, who teaches visual arts at the University of Portsmouth in England.

The Arsenale and the Giardini are sprawling gardens which house 90 national pavilions plus other venues with selected themes. The Venice Biennale also sanctions major "collateral" exhibitions, one of which is *Frontiers Reimagined*.

Sundaram faced three levels of vetting before getting his exhibition. "The principal one is the Biennale and its curatorial team -- we had to present an 80-page dossier. It was a long, excruciating process. Then we had to get clearance from the museum and the Italian ministry of fine arts."

According to Sundaram, Rabindranath Tagore's art got in entirely on merit. He revealed that the Italian authorities were very keen that the exhibition include a tribute to Tagore.

"These works were requested by the directors of the Italian government -- from the very beginning they said, 'Are you going to get Rabindranath Tagore's paintings?' They really wanted them."

Tagore was no stranger to Venice, Sundaram disclosed.

"At one point he was the most travelled individual in the world. He was invited to come to Venice -- and came on three different occasions in the 1920s, 1930s and even at a late stage just before World War II," Sundaram said.

"He made Santiniketan into a world-famous university -- every important figure that mattered in the East-West dialogue was brought to Santiniketan."

Sundaram has been a regular visitor to Venice since first coming in 1989 on a scholarship given by the Italian culture ministry.

He said about the poet: "He was truly a globalised individual, ahead of many, many people. He was thinking about it in a humanistic sense -- 'We are the children of this earth and we have to live together on that basis'."

Included are a bust of Tagore by Jacob Epstein that comes from Sundaram's own collection, plus three paintings on loan from Nirmalya Kumar, a professor at the London Business School but now based in Mumbai as head of strategy at the Tata group with a brief to report directly to the chairman, Cyrus Mistry.

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