

Amrita Sher-Gil: A Struggle for Self Discovery in Pre-Independence India

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The 1920s and 30s was a period of intense nationalist activities in the political as well as in the cultural sphere. The kind of changes in both these areas had a great impact on the art movement of the time. The new phase of Gandhian nationalism, in the post Swadeshi period, brought the peasant to the centre, and village was exalted. The need was felt to develop villages economically and provide them with dignity and self-confidence. Attainment of Swaraj was made equivalent to serving the villages and bringing about their development.

There was a widespread interest in folk and village cultures. Attempts had been made to study folk culture in Bengal even in the 19th century,¹ but there was a spurt of studies on folk culture and village life in the 1920's and 1930s. Rabindranath Tagore, following his exposure to rural Bengal, took an interest in its poetry, music, stories, lullabies and festivals. He published a collection of Bengali lullabies. Abanindranath's book on traditional Alpana, "Bangla Brata" also came out in the twenties. A French translation of the same also appeared around the same time from Paris. Gurusaday Dutt and Ajit Ghose travelled through Bengal in their attempt to revive the rich folk tradition of Bengal and wrote about the Patuas extensively². G.S. Dutt hailed the rural patua art as the "mother tongue" in the art of the Bengal. Ajit Ghose claimed that the Kalighat pats anticipated Cubism and Impressionism.

Hence the need was felt to move away from the Bengal School art mode, a mode that had elevated art to a high moral level, alienating it from the masses. The experience of the Swadeshi period had given to the artist a confidence in themselves, and now we see various departures from the Bengal school mould. The artists now felt confident enough to work independent of any movement or school.

In this paper an attempt will be made to study the departures made by one artist of the period, Amrita Sher-Gil. Amrita Sher-Gil represents different trend of departure, drawing from the vast resource of Indian tradition to develop their own individual style.

Innovative experimentalism can be found in the paintings of Amrita Sher Gil, who was an enigmatic figure in Indian art scene of the 1930s. The honesty, forthrightness, frankness and arrogance of her personality combined with her intuitive power and human sympathy which came forth in her art, made her a difficult person to understand. Hence, she was either showered with unreserved praise both for her effusive personality and for her 'truly modern' and Indian art³, or criticised as being a European whose art was either sentimental or irrelevant⁴.

In this paper, an attempt will be made to consider the struggle she underwent as an artist to discover for herself an identity, during her stay in India from 1934 to 1941. This quest becomes even more fascinating by the fact of her being half Indian and half European by birth. In her we see a curious mixture of insecurity and confidence. She knew she was not on firm ground in India, that she hadn't fully absorbed the Indian ethos, and yet in India, she knew, lay her destiny. At the same time, we see in her a confidence, almost a pride, arising out of her intellect, her talents in art, her association with European art institutes, her European upbringing.

Amrita Sher-Gil was born to the Hungarian Marie Antoinette, a passionate and brilliantly gifted Hungarian lady, and Sardar Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, and aristocrat, a philosopher and a scholar from the Majithia family of Amritsar. She was given a European upbringing and hardly got to move outside the circle of Westernised Indian even during her stay in Shimla before leaving for Paris.

In Paris, modern art had emerged from a historical juncture when capitalism had reached its imperialist phase. Therefore they reflected the mechanization and dehumanization of the society. But this was alien to the conditions Amrita Sher-Gil had been brought up in, both in India and in Hungary. India being a colony of Britain, was caught up in an anti colonial struggle, and was riding on a wave of nationalism. Hungary was a backward country as compared to Western Europe and was therefore outside the mainstream of European culture. The rise of nationalism had brought to the fore the question of national identity which was partly answered through attempts made to catch up with the West, and partly through realisation of the Hungarian literary tradition.

Amrita's predominantly romantic outlook did not let her accept the changes in the contemporary art scene in Paris, and she could find affinity only with the works of artists like Cezanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin all of who belonged thirty years back in time. Therefore, she turned to India where she knew she could contribute, as there was nobody of significance in the field of art. Another reason for opting for India over Hungary, was the influence Gauguin had on her. Just as Gauguin sought his artistic destiny in Martinique and Tahiti from 1887 onwards⁵ Amrita sought 'new sources of inspiration' for her 'artistic development' in India.⁶

The fact that she chose to settle in India for the rest of her life was not based on her love for India. She was happier in Hungary.⁷ Her interest in India, its culture, its people, its literature arose from her training in modern art which led her "to the comprehension and appreciation of Indian painting and sculpture."⁸ Hence she let "that hard and bitter common sense" prevail and sacrificed the sentiments that bound her to Hungary to return to "appreciate India and its worth."⁹

She came to India with a preconceived notion of India, "voluptuous, colourful, sunny and superficial," India she had seen in travel posters, What she saw here was different. Her first impressions of India contrasted with the above image, yet they were impressions of a foreigner a Gauguinistic image.

It was the vision of a winter in India desolate, yet strangely beautiful - of endless tracks of luminous yellow grey land, of dark bodied, sad faced, incredibly thin men and women who move silently, looking almost like silhouettes and over which an indefinable melancholy reigns.¹⁰

These impressions bear the characteristics of what she calls 'tourist mind' - superficial, "impressions of impressions" with no penetration or insight. These views closely correspond to those of Somerset Maugham who had come for a casual visit to India around this time.¹¹

The society in which she moved on coming to India, also did not help her much in understanding India. She associated with the upper class westernized Indians, indulging in a fashionable, glamorous life. Yet the quest for an identity, as an Indian and modern artist had begun. She began with deciding to discard her European dresses in favour of sarees because she did not want to identify with Eurasians, who were the only ones in India to wear European dresses.¹² And very soon, the milieu of upper class Indians among whom she moved, became a "dull, uninteresting and scandal mongering crowd" for her. But she could not reject them entirely

because of her own upbringing. At the most she took breaks to lead a "sequestered life" for a period "instead of going out dancing every five minutes and staying up till 2 and 3 in the morning and sapping my energy."¹³

The choice to paint the poor, wretched people was a conscious one. By 1930 the Indian villager had acquired an importance for the Indian intellectual-he came to represent contemporary reality. In his condition was seen not only the present but also the future of India. Besides the influence of the romanticized tropical women of Gauguin with their brown sensuous bodies also inspired her. She made it her artistic mission to "interpret the life of Indians and particularly the poor Indians pictorially... to depict their angular brown bodies, strangely beautiful in their ugliness; to reproduce on canvas the impression their sad eyes created on me."¹⁴

But she interested in the poor only as aesthetic objects, the poverty of India merely inspired her artistically. She had no desire to change their condition, nor did she think the condition could be changed. The people for her were "silent images of infinite submission and patience" and this was the quality that excited her. Through her paintings she endeavored to raise these poor people to the aesthetic plane. She wanted to become "an interpreter of the life of the people, particularly the poor and the sad" and this interpretation was to be purely pictorial because she hated "cheap emotional appeal".¹⁵

This romanticized version of Indian poverty can be seen in her painting titled 'Mother India' which is one of her earliest paintings in India. The women and her two children depicted in the painting with their brown faces with large eyes with an expression of sadness and resignation, seems the true embodiment of the 'poor India'. The crouched figures seem to lack in self confidence and belief in the capability to make any difference to the future. They appear as creatures to be pitied and Amrita idealized such subjects.

The emotions she characterised in her subjects was mainly derived from her own life experiences and the European literature and culture she was brought up on. Her favourites were Beethoven, Karinty, Dostoevsky, Ady, Van Gogh, Dezso Szabo, Bandelaire - all of whom were in different ways, introspective and passionate, all partaking of a tragic consciousness.¹⁶

In "Hill Men" though the passive, melancholic mood still pervades, the figures draped in shawls are not mere objects of pity. They are somewhat imposing and more dignified than the

woman in 'Mother India'. The forms here become simpler and there is a hint of respect for the Indian villager who seems tranquil even amidst his misery.

In early 1937 Amrita went on a trip to South India and visited Ajanta and Ellora, Hyderabad, Cochin, Trivandrum, Cape Comorin and Madurai. In this trip she discovered the richness and variety of Indian art - from the Rajput and Basholi miniature paintings to the Ajanta and Ellora paintings, to frescoes in places like Mattancheri, to Kathakali dance drama. Her letters from the South are full of excitement and detailed observation of the people, the landscape and the art. She admits that "I have, for the first time since my return to India, learnt something from somebody else's work."¹⁷ She discovered that Indian art offered "so many possibilities". In Ajanta, she found an analogy with Post Impressionists. She also discovered the rich colours that were a part of Indian life and landscape. Henceforth, her palette became varied and the earlier grey colours gave way to the inclusion of greens and reds and oranges.

The influence of her South Indian experiences can be seen in her four paintings "The Fruit Vendors", painted while still at Cape Comorin, 'The Bride's Toilet', 'The Brahmacharis' and 'The South Indian Villagers Going to the Market'. Whereas the Indian painters discovered in Ajanta the spirituality that for them characterised Indian art, Amrita with her European background was moved by the sense of humanism in Ajanta paintings. Hence, the figures in her paintings now acquire grace and sensuousness and new sense of mobility.

In 'Fruit Vendors' can be seen the colours that Amrita had mentioned while describing the Kerala landscape to her sister Indira.¹⁸ The background is of rich emerald green depicting vegetation of all kinds. The ground on which the figures are squatted is red ochre. The figures (a woman and two children) are draped in white clothes. Their faces are strangely calm and poised, a marked difference from the 'Mother India' faces. The faces also appear more 'Indian' as compared to those in 'Hill Men'. In 'Hill Men' the facial features are reminiscent of the portrait of Marie Louise¹⁹ she did in Europe.

In 'Brahmachari', the characters appear even more authentic. The painting depicts some South Indian brahmins sitting together in a group, with one of them (a guru) preaching to the others. The poses and the gestures are characteristic of Indian villages. The central figure of the preacher comes out very powerfully as a man of intellect, a thinker, a magnetic personality. There is a degree of grace and nobility about his face. The awed presence of others is also clearly

manifested. A deep red background is used with a grey-green foreground in an attempt to provide an environment, yet these colours do not disturb the calm of picture.

At around the same time, she also painted "Story Teller" and "Siesta" in which can be seen the influences of the miniatures she had seen on her South India tour and of Mughal miniatures. The landscape assumes importance in these pictures and the figures in the foreground usually blend with the landscape. These paintings were painted to convey "a sonorous modulation of colour and an unctuous texture". These and other paintings inspired by "Moghuls, Rajputs and Jains," depicted various kinds of group activities, like the grinding of haldi by women, a group of women involved in conversation etc. The huts, the trees, the animals, the bullock carts also assume importance. There is a great deal of activity in these pictures, though the themes are often borrowed from the miniatures rather than based on actual observation. There appears a greater degree of harmony between human and the natural and inanimate objects.

In 1938 Amrita Sher-Gil went to Hungary for a year to get married. She returned India in 1939 and stayed at Saraya, near Gorakhpur with her Uncle's family. The Majithia estate in Saraya was very feudal in character, and this prevented any real contact with the rural people there, who remained either servants or models for Amrita. Yet she does not seem to resent this life style, or the lack of contact with the villagers.

The paintings done from Saraya portray the view of a feudal India. "The Swing", "The Bride" and "Woman Resting on Charpoy" are all about feudal women, their desires and their longings. There is a sub-consciousness fear that haunts their faces, at the same time there is a yearning. These paintings also seem to represent the fears and predicament she herself was undergoing in this period. In a letter to her sister she wrote that she often woke up with "that sensation of unutterable lassitude and vague chimeric fear... how often do I not think of tomorrow and the many, many tomorrows with dread."²⁰ There was also developing a barrier between her and her husband which depressed her.²¹ This was probably why she could sympathize with the suppressed desires and unspoken fears for future of the feudal women.

We see through Amrita's paintings a certain change in attitude towards Indian reality. From an attempt to evolve a stereotype of an Indian' she began to paint figures which suited the different contexts in which he is placed. Therefore, 'Indian' included a multiple variety involved

in different activities. Emotions were expressed not just by faces and eyes but by the way the entire picture was done, the postures of the figures, the execution of the form. Over time her paintings became more human and more indigenous in their idiom.

Yet she seems to idealise the poor and the miserable²² and this prevents her from recognising the essence and complexities of Indian village life, for, alongwith the 'beauty' of the poor existed a more ugly side of poverty.

She also chose to ignore the harsh realities of modern life in this country. She completely shunned any aspect of Indian life influenced by the British and chose to idealise the apparently unchanged life and culture of India. Therefore South India by virtue of being unpolluted by the presence of Europeans seemed to her as a haven where she could settle down and keep painting.²³ Yet curiously she does not seem to mind the Chinese influence on the art of Trivandrum temples.²⁴

While there is effusive praise for Maurya artifacts and Moghul paintings, she does not seem to appreciate the "atrocious Hellenistic heads and figures"²⁵ or the influence of Persian art of Mughal miniatures.²⁶ It might be probable that the ongoing debate about the indigenous development of art in India had coloured her views.

She showed concern at the "apathetic attitude" of Indian public towards the "fostering of cultural renaissance" and recognised that an effort must be made to educate public taste and thereby, give impetus to the production of real works of art, because if the great majority of artists have to cater to the low taste of the public for a living, there can be no improvement in the standard of art.²⁷ But we see a contradiction in her views here. While she talked of developing public taste, she also priced her own paintings at rates that were exorbitant according to contemporary standards. The exhibitions did not make her works accessible to classes lower than upper middle class.

End Notes:

1. Reverend James Long had collected native proverbs. Reverend Lalbehari Dey collected and published fairy tales prevalent in the villages of Bengal. Taranath Mukherjee made an ethnographic study of the Patua community and their vocation.
2. See G.S. Dutt, "The Art of Bengal", *Modern Review*, August 1922.
Ajit Ghose, "Folk Art of Bengal", *Modern Review*, February, 1926.

3. See Charles Fabri, "Notes Towards a Biography of Amrita Sher-Gil", Lalit Kala Contemporary, No.2.
4. Letter by A. Shergil to Karl Khandalvala, 6.3. 1937, "Amrita Sher-Gil Letters" Vivan Sundaram et.al., ed., Amrita Sher Gil, Marg Publications, 1971, Bombay, p. 107.
5. For further information on Gauguin, See, R.H. Wilenski, Modern French Painters, London, 1940.
6. Amrita to her parents from Budapest, September 1934, in Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters, op.cit, p.92.
7. Ibid, p.93.
8. Ibid, p.42.
9. Ibid, p.93.
10. Amrita Sher-Gil, "Evolution of My Art", Vivan Sundaram et.al, ed. Amrita Sher-Gil, op.cit, p.139.
11. See Maugham's views as quoted by W.G. Archer, India and Modern Art, op.cit, p.81.
12. Letter from Amrita Sher-Gil to her mother, early 1935, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters", op.cit, p.93.
13. Letter from Amrita to Indira Shergil, 25-1-37, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters", op.cit, p.104.
14. Amrita Sher-Gil, "The Story of My Life", as quoted in W.G. Archer, India and Modern Art, op.cit, p.93.
15. Amrita Sher-Gil, "Trends of Art in India", Vivan Sundaram et.at, ed., Amrita Sher-Gil, op.cit, p.142.
16. Geeta Kapur, "The Evolution of Content in Amrita Sher-Gil's Paintings", Vivan Sundaram et.al., ed., Amrita Sher-Gil, op.cit, p.42.
17. Letter by Amrita to her parents 5.12.36, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters", op.cit, p.97.
18. Letter by Amrita to her sister 5.1 '37, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters", op.cit, p.100.
19. Marie Louise Chasseny was a painter friend of Amrita's with whom she shared an intimate relationship.
20. Letter by Amrita to Indira, 6.2.40, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters", op.cit, p.136.
21. Ibid, p.136.
22. "There is a certain charm in faces completely devoid of intelligence in art, stupid faces intelligently painted, like stupid faces that stare at one with looks of blank idiocy from the Greco Roman paintings." Letter of Amrita to Karl Khandalvala, 24.8. 1937, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters", op.cit, p.115.
23. Letter by Amrita to Indira, 5.1.37, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters", op.cit, p.101.
24. Letter by Amrita to Karl Khandalvala, 15.1.37, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letter", p.101.
25. Letter by Amrita to Karl Khandalvala, 18.12.39, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letter", op.cit, p.130.
26. Amrita to Karl Khandalwala, Feb./March 1938, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters", op.cit, p.124.
27. Amrita Sher-Gil, "Trends of Art in India", Vivan Sundram et.al, ed., Amrita Sher-Gil, op.cit, p.142.