

AMRITA'S VILLAGE

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Saraya, a little-known village in Uttar Pradesh's Gorakhpur district, will always be remembered for Amrita Sher-Gil's masterpieces. A tribute on her 100th birth anniversary.

AMRITA SHER-GIL entered India's cultural horizon like a shooting star, blazing a trail of gorgeous radiance, and vanished before the spectacle could be celebrated. As she was in life, so she was in death: an enigma. Her paintings too have remained intriguing. The creative impulse in Amrita kept her moving from place to place. Yet her heart lay in India, which she portrayed in a colour and form never done by any artist before her. While the Bengal school was trying to generally have a romantic revival of India's cultural heritage and the Bombay school was imitating the West, Amrita dared to break away from the rut and paint the real India in body and soul. In November 1937, she wrote in *The Tribune*: "I should like to see the art of India break away from both [Bengal and Bombay schools] and produce something vital, connected with the soil, yet essentially Indian. I am personally trying to be... an interpreter of the life of the people, particularly ... of the poor and the sad..."

Initially, she was overlooked, occasionally despised, but recognised ultimately as the harbinger of Modern painting in India. Born in Budapest in Hungary, she lived in Amritsar, Shimla and Lahore (now in Pakistan) in India; but very few know she also lived at the little-known Saraya and Dumri in present eastern Uttar Pradesh, where she produced some of her masterpieces.

Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941) was born of a Sikh father and a Hungarian mother. Her father, Umrao Singh Shergil of Majithia, was an aristocrat of scholarly

temperament and her mother, Marie Antoinette, a talented opera singer. They married in 1912, and Amrita was born in Budapest on January 30, 1913. She spent her formative years in Europe and was trained in painting in Florence and Paris.

The First World War prevented the family from leaving Europe, and it was only after the intervention of Sunder Singh Majithia, Umrao Singh's younger brother (a Member of the Viceroy's Imperial Legislative Council), that it could return to India in January 1921; but Amrita continued her visits to Europe in the years to come. She was highly talented and beautiful and lived a glamorous life, which soon brought her into the limelight. By 1939, she was living a bohemian life, which her parents did not approve of. They wanted her to settle down and lead a normal family life. There was no dearth of suitors, but understanding her own nature, Amrita married her maternal cousin Victor Egan (1910-1997), who accepted her as she was. Soon after their marriage in Budapest in June 1939, they returned to India to lead a settled life here.

At Saraya

They were brought to the remote village of Saraya to provide Amrita a quiet and hassle-free environment to cool down and relax. Saraya, renamed Sardar Nagar, was a family jagir received from the British. Dumri was part of the estate and close to Saraya; both the places were situated in Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh. At Saraya, Sunder Singh Majithia had built one of the largest sugar factories in India. So, whenever Amrita came to India even earlier, she visited Saraya. But now she had come to settle down

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there. Victor was appointed a doctor at the sugar factory, and Amrita painted as a freelancer.

Behind the walls of the sprawling factory, life was not much different from that at her parental establishment at Amritsar or Shimla. The household was full of relations, caretakers and servants. Amrita enjoyed horse rides and went on outings for hunting and pleasure. In this ambience of Oriental luxury, life was enjoyable. But this indulgence was transient. For, the fire in the artist was not out; it was only smouldering. The daily siren of the factory seemed to beckon her to look beyond the walls, where a different world lay bare in abject poverty and backwardness. People lived in primitive huts and the area was full of disease and pestilence. The flat landscape was monotonous. An average day was shrouded in a thin layer of fine dust kicked up by the bullock carts transporting sugarcane to the factory, moving slowly as if into eternity. The half-fed animals and their emasculated masters evoked a sense of despair and an unending patience, which stirred the artist in Amrita.

She had already travelled in India extensively and was immensely impressed by its art tradition, especially of Ajanta, Ellora and Mathura. By now, she had painted various subjects and had an occasional peek at rural life, too (*Hill Men*, 1935; *Girl with Pitcher*, 1937). But Saraya proved an eye-opener. The simple life of the poor, with curious limitations and containment drowned in an all-pervading loneliness and gloom, attracted her instantly. Now she wanted to settle in India and paint as an Indian. She wrote: "I can only paint in India. Europe belongs to Picasso, Matisse, Braque.... India belongs only to me."

Saraya inspired her to break her umbilical connection with the West.

Unison with Bharat Mata

Sadly, she was in extreme mental stress at the time. Married recently and brought to settle in a remote village, she was at a loss. In fact, before leaving for Europe, her father had distributed his property among his sons from his earlier marriage. So when forced to return to India after the First World War, he was virtually homeless, so to say. Amrita's stay was a makeshift arrangement courtesy her uncle Sunder Singh. Her parents were under acute economic strain and both of them were suffering from psychiatric conditions. Amrita's bohemian lifestyle and rebellious nature made matters worse. She had very unhappy relations with her

parents, especially her mother. So, once the initial bonhomie of the family subsided, things became monotonous and unproductive at Saraya. Her mother's nasty letters devastated her tender mind. She could have committed suicide, but she found in painting a source of deliverance. She identified her destiny with that of the poor masses and associated herself with their miseries and hope.

Expression of Happiness

At Saraya, she painted numerous scenes capturing the simplicity and grace in the midst of poverty, beginning with *View from Majithia House* (1934). *The Little Untouchable* (1936), *Red Clay Elephant* (1938), and *Ancient Story Teller* (1940) are representative offerings. Moments of relief and happiness are captured in *Resting*, *In the Ladies' Enclosure*, *The Swing* (1940), and *The Village Group* (1938)—the last sold for Rs.69,000,000 in 2006. "[T]hese little compositions are the expression of my happiness and that is why perhaps I am particularly fond of them," she remarked later.

She found relief in animals by whom she had been initially fascinated during her stay in a village near Budapest during the First World War. She painted horse, camel, cow, buffalo, bullock, dog, and so on. *The Horse and Groom* (1940) and *Camels* (1941) are representative compositions. But she developed a special attraction for the enormous elephant during her stay at Saraya (*Two Elephants*). Live elephants posed as models for her compositions. No wonder she visited in 1940 the famous animal fair at Sonepur in Bihar and felt extremely thrilled. *Elephants Bathing in a Green Pool* (1938) is a scene of

rustic life in its many nuances—a shared destiny of man and animal.

But women seem to have attracted her attention the most. She had painted Mother India in 1935; at Saraya, she was face to face with Bharat Mata. There were a large number of women in the household—her relations dipped in feudal luxury as well as those serving as domestic helps, besides countless others eking out a miserable existence in the neighbouring villages. Amrita became friendly with many of them and closely watched their pangs and happiness in life. Here, she portrayed Indian womanhood in countless moods and form.

She loved the inner beauty and grace of Indian women, but was appalled by their abysmal condition — dogged by perpetual oppression and a life of complete submission. She looked into their inner world like no other Indian painter had ever done before. Her closeness with some women at the Saraya household made her aware of their psychological problems.

The *Child Wife* (1936) and the Portrait of the *Bride* (1940) are depictions of grace under distress. The *Woman on Charpoy* (1940) exudes the psychology of a feudal Indian woman. Beneath her apparently restful pose there is turmoil of suppressed desires surging into a consciousness of social restraints.

Contrary to the general belief, Amrita was not unconcerned with the predicament of the masses, and the national movement. There was a background of a pro-British stance of the family, but it was not totally untouched by an urge for freedom from foreign rule. Amrita's father was a nationalist and, probably, had been in touch with political exiles during the First World War, especially the leaders of the Ghadar Party, Lala Hardayal, Raja Mahendra Pratap and Harbans Singh Attari. At Saraya, Amrita was very close to Teji, a member of the family and a Congress sympathiser. Amrita evinced interest in the political discussions in the family and she was inclined towards the Congress.

No wonder, what she painted was the main focus of the Congress, too—the village and the masses. She exposed their miseries and frustration; Gandhi found their political solution. Some of her paintings were once considered for use in the Congress propaganda for village reconstruction. She was attracted to the poor, distressed and the deprived like the Buddha, with a detached sense of karuna (compassion).

With her immense interest in and respect for India's cultural heritage, her stay at Saraya must have engrained deeper in her the basic cultural sensibilities of the Orient. From Saraya, she visited Varanasi—the confluence of all of India's philosophical traditions; closer home, Gorakhpur was the centre of the Gorakhpanty tradition of vairagya. But her visit to Kushi Nagar, the place of the Buddha's Mahaparinirvan, was memorable for her, reported her friend Karl Khandalavala later. Intriguingly, in Gandhi, she seems to merge at several levels—philosophy, vocation, and certain traits of lifestyle. Like Gandhi, she toured India extensively in order to understand her society and culture; she was mesmerised by the simplicity of life and the rich cultural tradition of the country at the same time; and finally she decided to be in indigenous attire (sari with bangles) like any Indian woman and focused on village India. Incidentally, she was born on January 30—on the date Gandhi died! She admired Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, both of whom consoled her death with touching sentiments.

Nehru was charmed both by her beauty and talent right from their first meeting. No wonder, when he went to Gorakhpur in October 1940, he visited her at Saraya, and she accompanied him to see him off at Gorakhpur.

Yet the surge of Amrita's creativity could not sustain for long at Saraya, as it lacked a congenial environment. There was no stimulating company there, no opportunity to expand her ideas. She felt trapped and suffocated as a "vague chimeric fear" gripped her towards the end of 1940. She felt some elemental forces were working against her.

Probably, she also suffocated in the restrictive environment of the Saraya household, as instinctively she craved freedom. Besides, heat and dust, epidemics and pestilence added to her woes.

Finally, in September 1941, the couple left Saraya to settle in Lahore. They were enthusiastic about the bright prospects there; but, suddenly, Amrita fell ill and passed away on the night of December 5-6, 1941. She was 28. Victor returned to Saraya and perpetuated her memory essentially as a loner for half of a century until his death in 1997. Today, hardly anyone knows about them there, but Saraya will be always remembered for Amrita's masterpieces that have moved the world. Amrita is dead, long live her spirit!

Information was obtained from Amrita's biographies, especially those by Yashodhara Dalmia and Vivan Sundaram. □