

## Containing the Cosmetic Nation: Acquisition of Sass Brunner Paintings

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**Abstract:** *The early Nehruvian era, is marked with new state institutions for art and culture. They aimed to accomplish one of the essential sovereign state duties of defining, categorizing and preserving a coherent National Culture. At this juncture, a particular acquisition of a series of eight paintings of a Hungarian Artist, Elizabeth Sass Brunner by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on behalf of the Government of India for the proposed National Museum, represents significant aspects of political and cultural leadership in the formative period of national culture. These paintings, seven of them depicting scenes of Amarnath yatra and one of MK Gandhi, all painted in a personalised post-impressionistic style, were purchased in September 1948 for their cultural importance by the government in spite of low opinion of the paintings by two state-appointed art experts. A close reading of this purchase related correspondence in the backdrop of historical and contemporary social-political developments, opens up a discursive and interrogative space around national culture, its priorities, preferences and, objectives. In many ways, these discussions become representative of the complex dialectics between social class, power, art and culture within the framework of the sovereign Indian state. I attempt to see how in the name of unity and integrity, the state controls the averse and conflicted sites within the cosmetic presentation of the nation and where national culture stands in relation to this. In this course, I evaluate the political prospects of the national culture through analysing its intimacy and incompatibility with contesting ideologies of modernity in the prevailing art practice in India. The following case study investigates these contextual trajectories through a sociological and formalistic analysis based on exploration of available data, archival sources, literature and relevant artworks.*



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## Introduction

On June 14th, 1948, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wrote this following letter to the then Education Minister Abul Kalam Azad.

“My dear Maulana,

During my recent visit to Naini Tal I saw a large number of paintings by Mrs Sass Brunner and Miss Elizabeth Brunner, the Hungarian artists. These paintings have been collected with a view of exhibition in Government House there. The standard of these paintings was very high and I particularly liked some of them. These paintings deal entirely with Indian subjects. I feel strongly that some of these paintings at least should be acquired by the Government of India. I have personally purchased for my own use some paintings including one of Mahatma Gandhi in Meditation.

Among others there is a painting of Gandhiji at evening prayer and a series of seven paintings depicting scenes on the way to Amarnath Cave and the cave itself. I think these should be acquired by us on behalf of the Government. I am not quite sure which ministry deals with this matter. I imagine it is yours. Anyway I am taking steps towards their requisition. I enclose a list of some of these paintings.

Yours

J. Nehru”<sup>1</sup>

Alongside the letter a minute was recorded by Nehru and an enclosure containing the list of paintings with their valuation was sent to the Education Ministry:

“...They depict Indian scenes and should be kept in India. I do not think that they should be sent abroad to our Embassies...I should like the evening prayer painting as well as the series of seven on Amarnath to be acquired by the Government.” the minute said.<sup>2</sup>

This communication eventually initiated a prolonged bureaucratic correspondence between PMO, Education and Finance Ministry and involved two renowned Art experts of New Delhi, leading to the acquisition of the paintings.<sup>3</sup> This correspondence and the involved ‘aesthetic object’ as an

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<sup>1</sup> Letter dated New Delhi, 14 June 1948, from J. Nehru, Prime Minister of India, to Abul Kalam Azad, Minister of Education

<sup>2</sup> Minute dated 14 June 1948, recorded by J. Nehru, Prime Minister of India and marked to his PPS

<sup>3</sup> While conducting the case study, I viewed the digitized reproduction of the paintings on NGMA, New Delhi chapter in The National Portal and Digital Repository for Indian Museums (an initiative of Ministry of Culture, Government of India). Presently seven out of eight paintings (except the painting titled ‘Entrance of the Cave’) are

embodiment of sensori-emotional-ethical values in an elevated class habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), reveals many significant aspects of the formative period of national culture. Firstly, it is a matter of significance to understand what aroused Prime Minister Nehru's nationalistic appreciation of this series of paintings of spiritual nature. Why the state saw an ideal "Indian subject matter" in a foreigner painter's work and felt an immediacy to "own" it for the nation, even before its regulation of an official cultural policy. Secondly, it is also important to study the hesitation and co-ordination of the state actors over forming an artistic-cultural ideology, as their personal tastes and class interests become evident in the process. I try to understand what these tastes and interests of this class have to do with the formation of national interest. Thirdly, the acquired aesthetic object's political presence in the sovereign state's impending nationalist-bureaucratic edifices as national assets served a unique role. In a complex dialectics of power and culture, such aesthetic objects were carefully curated and assigned as markers of national cultural unity. It is important to document the ways they contribute in substantiating the sovereign state's major disciplinary actions in the name of national unity. I engage with these contexts around the formative period of National Culture, partly through the lens of Kashmir as a battleground for the Indian state, both in cultural and political-military claims. The essay tries to uncover the priorities and objectives of the National culture in new India and establish its relationship with artistic modernism.

### **At the Stroke of the Midnight: Cultural Institutions in Nation building**

After three decades of Indian National Congress-led national movement and its motive of constructing a singular national identity by projecting common antagonism against the British, its much awaited due of self-rule came with the jubilant event of the transfer of power in 1947, followed by the bloodstained partition. The transfer of power, however, was encrypted with the monopoly of power in the hands of the minuscule nationalist faction, led by the historical governing classes<sup>4</sup>, the Brahmins and the alliance of upper castes.<sup>5</sup> In the name of nationalism,

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available for viewing in the repository at [http://museumsfindia.gov.in/repository/museum/ngma\\_del](http://museumsfindia.gov.in/repository/museum/ngma_del) (last accessed on 10/12/2018).

<sup>4</sup> By 'governing class' of India, Dr B R Ambedkar refers to a small group, composed of principally the Brahmins as the chief governing element and a cordial alliance of upper castes. He defines this group to be a hereditary ruling class, which is adaptable to changes and strategically maintains power, positions and prestige to uphold its supremacy over the servile class. Writing in 1940s, he identifies that "the governing class in India today is a Brahmin-Bania instead of Brahmin-Kshatriya combine as it used to be", because, "in these days of commerce money is more important than sword," Bania, "the worst parasitic class known to history," is the source of money to run Brahmin's nationalist political machine (Ambedkar, 1946). Dr Ambedkar explains how the characteristics of governing class, are prevalent across geographical and religious lines and often form tactical associations to preserve their share in power.

<sup>5</sup> G Aloysius's 'Nationalism without a nation in India', a sociological critique of India's nationalist historiography explains this political process in chapter III, IV and V. He argues that nationalism was launched by "a microscopic minority of mostly English educated men in Government service or engaged in new professions, drawn more or less exclusively from the Brahmin and upper caste communities" and analyses how under the deception of

the religiously sanctioned triumph of governing classes over the majority of Dalit, Bahujan, Pasmada, and Adivasi,<sup>6</sup> was continued and this sacred order was further ingrained with the birth of Republic of India. On the facade, state displayed Buddhist imperial symbols in its heraldic designs, first in the national flag and later its official incarnation into State Emblem, emphasizing prioritisation of secularism and social welfare in state affairs.<sup>7</sup> In this obvious moment of shifting power dynamics from Gandhian to Nehruvian doctrine, with the replacement of charka, the spinning wheel, a symbol of Gandhian Swaraj of village republics, with chakra, the wheel of law of emperor Ashoka, representative of India being an “international centre” of the past and as an icon of “freedom not only for ourselves but a symbol of freedom to all people who may see it,”<sup>8</sup> as Nehru himself would put it to the world, his colleagues on ground were preparing for an austere brahminical celebration.

14th August was scheduled as an auspicious day for the transfer of power by a group of Hindu astrologers as 13th and 15th were doomed as inauspicious. On the 14th afternoon, a grand yagna ceremony officiated by the Brahmin priests from Pandarsannidhi of Thiruvadhurai Adhinam, consisting chanting of hymns, sprinkling of holy water and marking women’s foreheads with mangal tilak; a traditional method of assuming power, took place at Dr. Rajendra Prasad’s residence. Following this act of explicit cultural Hinduist symbolism, the sovereign republic of India was born at the stroke of midnight at the Constituent Assembly within the auspicious hours of the day.<sup>9</sup> With ritualistic rationalisation of Brahminical Hinduism and its elevation as the national religion, Nehru had prefigured the mood of the moment in his *Discovery of India*, published a year back:

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nationalism, diverse governing classes with their own objective of power united themselves, eventually conquering over the socially politically marginalised servile classes, robbing them of their share in power.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Dalit, Bahujan, Pasmada and Adivasi’, these terms refers to the so-called lower castes, the Atishudra, Shudra and Tribal-indigenous people of the subcontinent. Pasmada is a Persian term meaning ‘those who have been left behind’ also refers to Shudra, Atishudra castes among the Muslim communities. There are rich histories of usage, interpretations, identification and assertion with these terms in the political and intellectual traditions of the marginalised people in the subcontinent. In many cases, Bahujan is used as an overarching term for all the four, suggesting the worker, creator and producing people, the majority of society.

<sup>7</sup> Nationalism constructed a syncretic culture with a pantheon of deliberate revival of pan-Indian icons, among which Ashoka and Akbar were entrusted as archetypes of sovereignty, righteousness, non-violence and religious tolerance. Thus, Ashokan Buddhist symbols had gained a new political economy within nationalist imagination of past.

<sup>8</sup> Nehru’s Flag Resolution address on July 22, 1947 in constituent assembly (Proceedings of the Indian Constituent Assembly 1947, vol. 4)

<sup>9</sup> Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya gives a vibrant account of events around the transfer of power in ‘The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia’, 2000, (p. 53–54)

That mixture of religion and philosophy, history and tradition, custom and social structure, which in its wide fold included almost every aspect of the life of India, and which might be called Brahminism or (to use a later word) Hinduism, became the symbol of nationalism. It was indeed a national religion, with its appeal to all those deep instincts, racial and cultural, which form the basis everywhere of nationalism today. (Nehru, 1973, p. 138)

The early Nehruvian era<sup>10</sup> is marked with new state institutions dedicated to Art and Culture, aiming to accomplish one of the essential sovereign state duties of defining, categorizing and preserving a coherent National Culture. Identification, negotiation, and acquisition of aesthetic objects, in this context objects and images which are self-representative of nation's cultural-historical ideals, were being defined. One of the first such demonstrations by the sovereign state was achieved as early as August 1948 with a grand exhibition in the halls of the Government House, New Delhi.<sup>11</sup> Though it was a succeeding version of the London's Royal Academy of Art's "Exhibition of Art, Chiefly from the Dominions of India and Pakistan" (1947) marking the transfer of power, the imagination of a curated national culture housed in a grand National Museum emerged out of this event. Acquisition of Art and setting up new institutions to house them, would serve the sovereign state's desire of projecting a persistent national history and culture. The synthesis of Culture and State power with a cultural normalcy affiliated to Hinduist National history and liberal modernity wasn't a part-time interest of the sovereign state, but rather one of its widespread concerns. In a country of heterogeneous cultural-historical existence, to secure their seats of power, governing classes required a major imagination to prevent any significant structural alteration among the aspiring oppressed societies. This was partly attempted with the narratives of historical-cultural homogeneity, centering the singular national identity. Containing hostility, antagonism and potential rage of the oppressed societies within an integrated political-electoral body of uninterrupted "caste iron" democracy (Anderson, 2015, p. 112) was governmentally implemented. Colonial inheritance of control by military and diplomatic means, followed by a validating cultural mission, was forwarded by the sovereign state as its crucial ideological apparatus, with essential reconceptualization. Thus, Art and Cultural Institutions, now free from former colonial attachment and anti-colonial subtext, became the emissaries to forge myths of national unity. They were also strategically interposed within sovereign state machinery to rationalise Delhi's economic-political control over the subcontinent as National Integrity.

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<sup>10</sup> The word 'Nehruvian' refers not only to the industrialised and centralised polity within the institutional-bureaucratic functionaries of welfare state, headed by the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on socialist lines, but an entire regime of cultural and secretarial ideology centred around the aura of so called elite secular-liberal intelligentsia and statesmen in new India. In the last years of British rule, Nehruvian outlook dominated over Gandhian, in negotiating the transfer of power. This ideological era starts with Nehru and runs through the reigns of his daughter Indira Gandhi and grandson Rajiv Gandhi.

<sup>11</sup> In Tapati Guha-Thakurta's 'Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of art in colonial and post-colonial India', Chapter V elaborates on the national claims projected through this exhibition.

In this scenario, one of the initial State acquisitions of aesthetic objects was of Elizabeth Sass Brunner's paintings. At the dawn of sovereign state's definitions in modern semantics of art and culture, this acquisition of modern pictures was also significantly paralleled with the purchase of Indian state's first acknowledged modern artist Amrita Shergil's works.<sup>12</sup> Need for regulation in art purchase and outlining future institutions, eventually resulted in the formation of National Art Treasures Fund in 1952 and an expert body of Arts Purchase Committee in 1953. These initiatives lead to the establishment of National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) in 1954 and a new National Museum in 1960.<sup>13</sup> This particular purchase of Brunner paintings, passionately pursued by Nehru, suggest the patterns in state promotion of cultural iconophilia and considerations of national asset, which is examined in length hereafter.

### **Cosmic Artist's Odyssey to Mystic India**

To link the distant contexts of a recluse Hungarian artist's post-impressionistic paintings and arousal of Indian Prime Minister's sense of national duty, I initially begin with analysing Elizabeth Sass Brunner's artistic life and practice and what caused her eventual flight towards the Orient and later engage with Nehru's aesthetic interests. Elizabeth Sass Brunner (born as Elizabeth Farkas on 14th June 1889) was from the Hungarian town of Nagykanizsa, whose father was the chief constable of the town and mother came from a Transdanubian landowning family (Renner, 2007).<sup>14</sup> She developed a deep spiritual relationship with her artist-mentor Ferenc Sass Brunner through their practice and got married, dedicating their lives to the cause of "art and truth."<sup>15</sup> Ferenc Sass studied in naturalist painter Simon Hollósy's free school in Munich and was greatly

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<sup>12</sup> Amrita Shergil (born 1913) was a modern artist in the early 20th century. From Hungarian-Sikh origin, Amrita was born in Budapest and trained as an artist in Paris. Amrita returned to India in 1934 and lived and worked here till her sudden death in Lahore in 1941. Few years after her death, through Nehru's active intervention, 33 paintings of Amrita Shergil, done in the last phase of her life, were purchased by the state from her husband Victor Eagen, whose earlier offer for their sale was refused by the government in 1947. Amrita's father, Umrao Singh Shergil insisted the state to acquire them from Eagan and in exchange freely offered a larger number of Amrita's earlier worked to the state. A total number of 96 Shergil paintings came in possession of the state by 1948. Vidya Shivadas's essay 'Museumising Modern Art: National Gallery of Modern Art, the Indian Case Study' gives a detailed account of acquisition of Amrita Shergil's works and its importance in the subsequent formation of NGMA in new Delhi.

<sup>13</sup> This same decade of Nation building coincided with the formation of three apex bodies for culture, known as Akademies, the Sangeet Natak Akademi (1953), Lalit Kala Akademi (1954) and Sahitya Akademi (1954), all in the heart of National Capital. State also essentially engaged with the crafts and other artisanal produces with the inception of All India Handicrafts Board in 1952 and a Crafts Museum in 1956.

<sup>14</sup> I have considered Zsuzsanna Renner's 2007 essay, 'Pilgrimage, An Outline of Elizabeth Sass Brunner's and Elizabeth Brunner's Life and Artistic Career' as a chief resource on Sass Brunner's and Elizabeth Brunner's initial artistic careers.

<sup>15</sup> Their daughter Elizabeth Brunner was born in 1910 who would travel to India with her mother Sass Brunner and spend the rest of her life in India.



influenced by his master's philosophy of art. The active artist couple's careers were seriously affected during the World War 1 since a great sense of rootlessness and disillusionment towards the western rationalism had taken over them amidst the desolation and division of their native land.<sup>16</sup> In the post-war times, Sass Brunner resumed her practice in the quest for finding a different relation to the universe through the practice of art and was seeking more deeper meaning into nature, colours and light, in a peculiar combination of impressionist ideals and pantheistic vision.<sup>17</sup> She established a close association with the existing members of Gödöllő Artist's Colony and their weavers' workshop. This colony, founded in 1901 under Tolstoian influence, was primarily concerned with the rejection of industrial mass production, return to craftsmanship, following the peasant's way of life by reforming their eating and clothing habits. This new enthusiasm around the rediscovery of folk art was also related to determinations to trace the symbolism of Hungarian folk motifs to the Central Asian origin of the Hungarians. For Brunner, 'art of life,' took "priority over art."<sup>18</sup> In this course, one event from 1925 may have a special mention. Sass Brunner, unsatisfied with her quest for peace and truth, went into deep crisis and almost committed suicide while practicing extreme asceticism. Later she wrote to a friend:

I challenged destiny, gave my nerves a trial and looked for something extraordinary... Eventually, I changed my way of life and after a 28-day fast I found myself, or rather, I surrendered and found God... I found the principle that brought me to the world, that keeps me alive, that governs, gives and takes away. (Renner, 2007)<sup>19</sup>

The Hungarian Theosophical Society, founded in 1906, was instrumental in the coming decades in publishing numerous theosophical works, including translation of the Bhagavad Gita and other books on Hinduism and Buddhism, generating interest on Asiatic mysticism. Brunner possible contacts with Spiritual Artists' Society of Jenő Remsey which encouraged deep meditation and

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<sup>16</sup> Austro-Hungarian Empire was broken up into smaller nations after World War I while Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory and more than half of its population. Displacement within freshly drawn borders of newly established nations in the previously unified Austria-Hungary region caused political turmoil and a sense of uprootedness among Hungarians. Ferenc Sass could not recover from this shock which eventually ended his art career. Elizabeth Sass Brunner did not submit to the hopelessness and sought new ways to continue her practice.

<sup>17</sup> Brunner mentions "I cannot just be a painter. I cannot only use techniques when I paint. This is how God gave life to my soul so that He can be manifested through it."

<sup>18</sup> Brunner got acquainted with neo-Zoroastrian religious movement called Mazdaznan and vegetarian movement of Béla Bicsérdi (1872-1951). Bicsérdi was a Hungarian athlete, naturopath and a pioneer of health culture and holistic therapy in Hungary. His methods, involving fasting, raw vegan diet, regular water-cure, sunbathing, daily outdoor exercising became popular as Bicsérdism. He claimed that following this method he cured himself from all his illnesses, and his hair and lost teeth grew back. Bicsérdism had great influence on Brunner and she strictly followed its methods of cure.

<sup>19</sup> Géza Bethlenfalvy, Tiszta élet öröm. In memoriam Sass Brunner Erzsébet 1889–1950, quoted by Zsuzsanna Renner.

faith in Sun Cult, influenced her to capture, enhance and spiritually interpret light in art. This phase of artistic tradition in Europe was marked with post-impressionist yearnings, where romanticising about exotic lands and neo-bohemianism were continuing as artistic norms. In this environment,<sup>20</sup> Sass Brunner's mission of art and life, progressively had an Eastwards direction. At the end of 1928, Sass Brunner had a vision, where an old, bearded man told her, "You have already got all that you can achieve here. You will find in India what you are looking for."<sup>21</sup> Sass Brunner along with her daughter started their journey as pilgrims to India on 5th of May 1929. On her way, she wrote a letter to Rabindranath Tagore in Hungarian from Sicily:

Dear Master! ... My understanding has led me to Indian philosophy, and you, Master, are a wonderful representative of this philosophy... Unconsciously I have felt for a long time that I belong here; this winter, however, I sensed such a strong call that, urged by some inner compulsion ... (you) may help us to merge with the majestic beauties of India's ancient soil and to paint the most exquisite spiritual pictures... I am on my way.<sup>22</sup>

On 17 February 1930, Brunners reached Bombay by sea, "clad in hand-woven clothes and non-leather sandals" and Hungarian consul in Bombay helped them to travel to Calcutta. They were hosted by Tagore, first in Calcutta and later were integrated within Santiniketan's University community.<sup>23</sup> Sass Brunner began meditating and painting "pure Indian atmosphere" from her cottage in Santiniketan, which was to flourish into orientalist affinity and saintly respectability, marking the next phase of her artistic life.

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<sup>20</sup> In the weavers' workshop of Gödöllő Colony, Sass Brunner started experimenting with textile, which included her hand-woven clothes and non-leather footwear. Gödöllő Colony had close associations with Eastern philosophies via Nagybánya school's links, like with the gnostic philosopher Jenő Henrik Schmitt (1851-1916). Schmitt's gnostic philosophy was deeply inspired by Tolstoy's 'The Kingdom of God is Within You' and inclined towards the doctrines of Eastern religions. Those days, reports of India's struggle for freedom, notes on M.K Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, affluence of Indian maharajas used to fill the public attention through Hungarian press. All of these created a positive atmosphere and access to the orientalist imagination of organic spiritual life in the East.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Sass Brunner claimed to have such visions frequently, giving her directions of life and art. Later the old man from the vision turned out to be Rabindranath Tagore's father as she recognised him from a photograph at the poet's house in Calcutta. Mentioned in Ranjee Shahani's 'Innocence of Eye, Sass Brunner: Woman and Artist', 1957

<sup>22</sup> Margit Köves: Two unpublished letters of Elizabeth Sass Brunner in the Tagore Archives (Rabindra Bhavan), Santiniketan, quoted by Zsuzsanna Renner.

<sup>23</sup> Daughter Elizabeth Brunner joined Kala Bhavana and studied painting under Nandalal Bose's supervision. She also took lessons in music and dance and eventually participated in one of Tagore's dance drama.



## Origins of Nomadic Escapism as Aesthetics

An analysis of sociohistorical and aesthetic dialectics of the time in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that had set the stage for Elizabeth Sass Brunner's artistic creed, will explain this trend of escapism and utopic quest. Simon Hollósy, who had a great influence on the contemporary Hungarian art scene, was a big admirer of Impressionism and under his influence, an art school and artist colony had emerged in Nagybánya in 1896.<sup>24</sup> Deeply inspired by the triumph of impressionism across Europe, the school was largely concerned with naturalistic style and 'plein air' painting<sup>25</sup> in its rural settings, rejoicing closeness to nature in the local landscape, its lines, colours and were embedded with symbolism. Their artistic philosophy was also connected with the prevailing meditation techniques of Buddhism which came as an influence from their mentor Hollósy's brother who had organised a Buddhist community and published a book on Buddhism in 1893, in Hungary.<sup>26</sup> Sass Brunner's artistic self was shaped by her association with this school and was significantly inspired by Asiatic mysticism. An explanation of the prevailing impressionist genres would help to understand the early roots of these tendencies in art and philosophy, since artistic developments of this time are measured around the genesis of impressionism.

Impressionism as an artistic tendency originated among the disillusioned bourgeoisies in Europe, particularly in France, as a reaction to the degenerating life in an industrial society. By 1860s, French Realism's attempt to pose a socio-critical edge to the non-political "amusement, peace and quiet" of earlier Romantic art was done away with. An impressionist ideal as the new expression of modern conditions, with a much reactionary form of new romanticism had appeared, isolationist in attitude, submitted in "romantic renunciation of practical, active life" (Hauser, 2005). In this summit of self-centric aesthetic culture and realization of bohemian self-image, almost a self-destructive, denaturalizing process was adopted by the artist to overcome the natural human within

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<sup>24</sup> Nagybánya Artists' Colony (established 1896), established by Simon Hollosy along with Hungarian artists Janos Thorma and István Réti. Thorma and Réti too were students of in Munich and Thorma later went to study in Paris. Both of them became instrumental in establishment of the colony in their native Nagybánya (formerly in Hungary, presently in Romania).

<sup>25</sup> According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Plein-air painting, in its strictest sense, the practice of painting landscape pictures out-of-doors; more loosely, the achievement of an intense impression of the open air (French: plein air) in a landscape painting." By mid 1850s, the former practice of completing a painting in the studio from the sketches done outdoors, progressively became outmoded with the arrival of collapsible tin paint tube, widely marketed by the colour merchants Winsor & Newton from 1841. Outdoor movement of the painter was made possible by prepared colour tubes and lightweight, portable easels. However, open air painting became popular only in late 1860s with the first impressionist painters in France and later became a standard artistic mannerism of impressionism.

<sup>26</sup> This organisation was linked to Subhadra Bhikshu, the German lay Buddhist, Friedrich Zimmermann (1851–1917), who had represented the Maha Bodhi Society in Germany since 1892. Earlier Hungarian Orientalist Alexander Csoma de Kőrös works had created general curiosity of India and Tibetan Buddhism in Hungary.

him/her, divorcing art from all earthly concerns and complexities of human societies. Though neo-bohemia was supposed to be a protest against the bourgeois capitalist order in social life, bohemia was also the new cultural capital, where non-achievement in the art establishment was not only the norm but this “lack of success” itself was a marker of a successful impressionist in the initial stage. At the rising hours of colonialism, discovery of new lands and exoticization of cultures of occupied lands through colonial knowledge production, import of African and oriental artefacts to Europe, new museums and industrial exhibitions provided context and resources on which the impressionists could build their romantic idealization of unknown dreamy lands as a real escape from rationalism and modern, industrial culture of Europe.

Though the desire to escape from urban industrial life didn't stop impressionists from collaborating with the urban art connoisseur, assigned to consider visual art on new grounds of pure aesthetic autonomy of colour and design. Soon the impressionist art came to be characterised by a way of seeing, “shaped by experience and sensibility, not by tradition; a style whose keynote was sunlight and broken color, vividly recording the fleeting impression; the autonomy of painting with respect to reality; a free choice of subjects regardless of the old claims of "nobility " and "refinement" (Blunden, 1980, p. 47). Impressionist features like thin brush strokes or thicker impastos, emphasis on depicting tone and light by creating simultaneous contrast of complementary colours and textures and outdoor painting were not only fronts of departure from tradition, but also measures of survival at the time when photography had already surpassed painting as a more reliable medium for emulating reality and recording truth. Impressionism's focus was partially set on achieving what their contemporary photographic technology could not achieve (Levinson, 1997).

Thus, the impressionists, with their available bourgeois leisure, immersed themselves into light, colour and multiplicity of tones and textures, removing themselves from the responsibility of subject. Sole importance in momentary effects, patterns, design eased the painterly workmanship which was seen as a radical artistic process (Schapiro, 1997). Curiosity around oriental artefacts, particularly ukiyo-e woodcut prints from Japan stimulated impressionist pictorial space with asymmetrical compositions, transitory subjects, abstract colour and lines. This new height of aestheticism of pure visual elements, ephemeralness, hedonist mysticism etc. gave impressionist art an overall metaphysical logic, making art and artist, progressively irrelevant and obscure. The Capitalist market was quick to recognise the commodity potential in impressionist art being a harmless aesthetic stand against capitalism.<sup>27</sup> Poets and artists like Paul Verlaine, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gough, Paul Gauguin etc. epitomised

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<sup>27</sup> Alongside consignment or subvention contracts with art dealers and subsequent support of the nouveau riche European patrons, impressionists soon attracted attention of the American collectors, with their stocked “wealth of underrated treasures.” Painters like Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley found direct patronage and contracts from Parisian Art Dealers like Paul Durand-Ruel and George Petit.

impressionist and post-impressionist incarnations like alcoholic, nihilist, lunatic, tramp, wanderer, voyager etc.<sup>28</sup>

In a comparable pattern of nomadism, Elizabeth Sass Brunner with her daughter, travelled across India as a pilgrim and cosmic artist from 1930s. Supported and hosted by spiritual institutions and various Maharajas, their expedition went on from “Bengal to Gujarat and from the Himalayas to Rameshwaram, looking for material, ideas and inspiration” (Brunner, 1952). In 1940, their destination was Kashmir and a pilgrimage to the outlying Amarnath Cave Shrine. A new series of paintings made after this journey was exhibited at the Art Society of Srinagar in the same year. This is the same series of paintings currently in discussion.<sup>29</sup>

### **Individual Interest as National Interest: Nehru’s Kashmir**

But my mind was filled with the excitement of my return, and it pleased me to be welcomed everywhere as a brother and a comrade, who, in spite of long absence, was still of Kashmir and was coming back to his old homeland. With joy, I saw the reality of the pictures in my mind which I had treasured for long years. (Nehru, 1948, p.222)

Thus, wrote Nehru after his visit to Kashmir in May 1940 as a guest of Sheikh Abdullah’s National Conference. Kashmir’s “son of the soil,” Nehru belonged to a prominent Kashmiri Brahmin family, which had migrated from the Kashmir valley to the plains in the early 18th century.<sup>30</sup> While adapting to local Brahminical customs, Nehru’s strictly endogamous family kept their Kashmiri Pandit institution alive and were intimately connected to their own caste networks across the plains.<sup>31</sup> Nehru describes the very enterprising and ingrained national character of Kashmiri Brahmins, “the Hindus of Kashmir proper” as “the middle-class intelligentsia” and “though only about 5 per cent., are an essential and integral part of the country, and many of their families have played a prominent part in Kashmir’s history for a thousand years or more.” He also mentions the

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<sup>28</sup> Similar leanings can be seen among a contemporary group of Russian realist artists, the Peredvizhniki, the wanderers, through their artistic commitment remained distinct from the impressionists.

<sup>29</sup> During the World War 2, Brunners were interned in Poona and later in Nainital by the British Government for being ‘hostile foreigner’ Hungarians. Brunners liked the idyllic hill station and eventually settled there. When Nehru visited Nainital in June 1948, the Brunners were already well-known residents of the town and were having an exhibition at the Government House of the Summer Capital of United Provinces. Sass Brunner died on 19 January 1950 in Bareilly. Elizabeth Brunner continued to live in India and was conferred with Padma Shree in 1985. She passed away in Delhi in 2001.

<sup>30</sup> Nehru’s ancestor Raj Kaul, a Sanskrit and Persian scholar, was granted a jagir with a house by the Mughal Emperor Farrukhsiyar in the imperial capital of Delhi. In the course of events the family of noblemen moved to Agra from Delhi and finally settled in Allahabad.

<sup>31</sup> Nehru shares many anecdotes around his Kashmiri Brahmin ancestry in ‘An Autobiography’ (1936)

intellectual contribution of his community who “do well in examinations and in the professions” and “have played an important part in public life and in the professions and services in India, out of all proportion to their small numbers.” Once accused by the Hindu Mahasabha of his ignorance of “Hindu Sentiments” Nehru defended foregrounding his Kashmiri Brahmin inheritance of “remarkable capacity for adaptation” to the prevailing cultures, while preserving the Pandit kinship and grace of Aryan racial features. Nehru also states that his unorthodox family had accepted two of his sisters’ marriages to non-Kashmiri men, belonging to distinguished savarna<sup>32</sup> families (Nehru, 1936). Nehru’s family represented the truly modern liberal, national savarna family, a true reflection of Indian governing class unity and multiculturalism.<sup>33</sup> Though Nehru was brought up in Allahabad, he always bore an intrigued enthrallment towards Kashmir and the contiguous Himalayas. In his autobiography, Nehru expressed his longing for Kashmir:

The higher valleys and mountains of Kashmir fascinated me so much that I resolved to come back again soon...the very thought of which filled me with delight, was a visit to Manasarovar, the wonder lake of Tibet, and snow-covered Kailas nearby. ... I have not even been to visit Kashmir again, much as I have longed to, and ever more and more I have got entangled in the coils of politics and public affairs. (Nehru, 1936, p. 38)

In another instance, in *The Discovery of India*, written during his imprisonment between 1942–46 at Ahmednagar Fort, Nehru expresses his intense romanticism for Kashmir. He writes:

...we may still sense the mystery of nature, listen to its song of life and beauty, and draw vitality from it...there are some places where it (song of life) charms even those who are unprepared for it and comes like the deep notes of a distant and powerful organ. Among these favoured spots is Kashmir where loveliness dwells and an enchantment steals over the senses. (Nehru, 1973, p. 222)

In a unique blend of individual romantic fetishism alongside estimated political interests, these words came a few years after his trip to Kashmir in 1940. Nehru’s obsession for Kashmir’s exquisiteness didn’t translate into feelings for its prevailing human conditions, apart from his pity and affectation. Nehru’s avaricious political designs for Kashmir were determined by national gentry’s interests,<sup>34</sup> and his passion for Kashmir paralleled with the ongoing nationalist project of

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<sup>32</sup> The first three in varna hierarchy, Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas are collectively called Savarna (meaning superior varna).

<sup>33</sup> Nehru had two sisters, Vijaya Laxmi Pandit formerly Swarup Kumari Nehru was married to Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, a Saraswat Brahmin barrister from Kathiawar and Krishna Nehru Huthesing to Raja Gunottam Huthesing of the aristocratic Jain merchant family from Ahmedabad. Nehru’s cousin Braj Kumar Nehru was married to Magdolna Friedman, Hungarian born Jew, who later came to be known as Fori Nehru.

<sup>34</sup> Due to Nehru’s renewed interest in Kashmir, Nehru visited the princely state in May 1940 after a gap of twenty-three years. He preached Congress’s standpoints to Kashmiris in general, explaining the expected stake of a common Kashmiri in a united nation building and assuring his Kashmiri Pandit brethren of continuing privilege and

Indian unity, of which Nehru was the central protagonist. In 1938, Nehru was foretelling the future of different nationalities within the subcontinent with much confidence, “It will thus be seen that the forces working for Indian unity are formidable and overwhelming, and it is difficult to conceive of any separatist tendency which can break up this unity” (Nehru, 1948, p. 21). His propagation and conviction on Indian Unity even continued to identify itself with obscure references in Brahminical Hindu epics and scriptures. A few years ago, Nehru was drawing the cultural map of India substituted with Hindu myths. These territorial injunctions became omnipresent in realpolitik to define the borderlines for the Nation building project to take place. Adoring Shankaracharya as the apotheosis of spiritual unity, quoting from Brihadaranyak Upanishad to praising Gayatri Mantra, Nehru ‘historicised’ and eulogized Indian unity, passing parallels to another myth of Roman Unity. His mention of Amarnath as one of the thresholds of Indian culture should draw our attention:

Indian culture was so widespread all over India that no part of the country could be called the heart of that culture. From Cape Comorin to Amaranath and Badrinath in the Himalayas, from Dwarka to Puri, the same ideas coursed, and if there was a clash of ideas in one place, the noise of it soon reached distant parts of the country. (Nehru, 1936, p. 430)

Devoid of any political or historical logic this language subsequently became nationalism’s official semantic. But behind all this noble mythical rhetoric, imperial designs were deep-rooted in its very intent. As early as July 8, 1936, Nehru was writing to Kashmiri politician Premnath Bazaz:

It is clear that, the ultimate fate of Kashmir, as of the other Indian States, is bound up with that of India as a whole, so that the larger struggle for Indian Independence governs the situation and the more or less local struggle in Kashmir must be viewed in the light of the Indian struggle (Chandel, 2017).<sup>35</sup>

From 1940 onwards, Nehru’s persistent involvement with Kashmir, both as a “son of the soil” and Indian statesman, implanted aspects of the state’s disastrous future.<sup>36</sup> Looking back to the purchase

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safety. His twelve-day trip was hosted by the prominent leaders of the Kashmiri Upper Caste Muslim led National Conference, who were leading a movement for democratic reforms on Congress’s “national lines” against the autocratic Dogra regime, headed by its Maharaja, Hari Singh.

<sup>35</sup> Nehru’s letter to Prem Nath Bazaz, quoted in Nitin Chandel’s ‘Jawaharlal Nehru’s Intervention in Kashmir till 1947’.

<sup>36</sup> Nehru’s preoccupation with Kashmir resulted further complications in the subsequent years with open antagonism between rival camps of Nehru and Jinnah supported Muslim Conference, following Sheikh Abdullah’s “Quit Kashmir” memorandum and increasing hostility from the King Hari Singh resulting violent clashes and military action. Nehru’s vehement interference and intrusion into Kashmir violating the State’s order added perpetual encumbrance adding final miseries of the state by influencing the post-partition resolution making. The history of accession in the face of internal revolt and external invasion, and succeeding events of war, UN resolution and Indian

of Brunner paintings, one can link Nehru's selective interest in Kashmir images of Brunner at the 1948 exhibition with his personal and political interest in the region. Nehru's family was already close to the artist duo, admired their works at her exhibition in London's Cooling Gallery in 1938. But the Kashmir images, painted in 1940, received special attention from Nehru, evoking his sense of national duty in 1948 and at his insistence, were acquired by the state. This passage of the Amaranth paintings from imageries of Nehru's personal interest to an artefact of National interest was a natural transformation under the neonate sovereign state's endorsement. A closer look at the paintings, revealing their artistic qualities in relation to the ongoing cultural and political ambitions of the state, will help to comprehend this phenomenon better.

### **Brahminical validity of Nation: Brunner Paintings**

In June 1948, when Brunner's exhibition was organised in the Government House of Nainital, with assistance from the then Governor of United Provinces Sarojini Naidu, this series on Amarnath, was also part of it. Nehru attended the exhibition on 11th of June while he was on a state visit to Nainital and 'particularly liked' 8 paintings of Sass Brunner out of a large body of work on display.<sup>37</sup> The list of paintings that Nehru instructed to purchase, as written in his enclosure to letter to Azad, were:

“Each painting 2 feet by 3 feet. Namely:

Shesnag Lake (South View)

Shesnag Lake

Through the snow bridge

Panchtarni

Entrance of the Cave

Birth of Amarganga

Natural Ice Shiva Linga inside Amarnath Cave.

Total Price: Rs. 10,000/-

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state's unreliable promises, puppet state governments in Srinagar, psycho-politics of two egoistical sovereign states, causing interminable turbulence, heavy militarization, innumerable death and destruction, is well known.

<sup>37</sup> Nehru was in Nainital on 11<sup>th</sup> June 1948 attending a meeting between Edwina Mountbatten and Sarojini Naidu in the Government House where the exhibition was taking place. Nehru noticed and negotiated for the paintings amid his busy schedule of delivering a speech on upcoming plan of accession of Hyderabad and addressing teachers, administrators and students at the Birla Vidyamandir, Nainital.



## Evening Prayer with Gandhiji at sunset

by S Brunner

size: 2'6" x 3'4" oil painting. Price Rs 5,000/-<sup>38</sup>

Seven of out the eight paintings were artistic records of sites on the pilgrimage to the Amarnath Caves. Amarnath is a cave shrine at four thousand meters' height remote mountains in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The series of paintings emerged out of smaller journalistic sketches, perhaps made during the travel, expressed the fulfilment of a passionate dream of the artist. A yatra to the almost inaccessible cave calls for an extraordinary test of the pilgrim's devotional spirit where "one felt there in the presence of the Maker of the Universe" and "Many die by the wayside, happy in the fulfilment of their purpose."<sup>39</sup> These paintings are heavily burdened with Brunner's mystic call for an India, which she described as, "the gate to thought: the master of senses of life," and "warden of the truths of millennial metamorphosis."<sup>40</sup> Through the painter in herself, she attained the transcending experience of awe and fulfilled her divine wish to witness an 'original' threshold to her imagined India, a manifestation of 'ancient Aryan wisdom'. Thus, the subject was also subliminally one of her own interests in finding racial association of her origin in Central Asia. These images are painted in a deeply personalized post-impressionistic style and are characteristically possessed with the artist's pensive sentimentalism and isolationism. They are also the first of such artistic documents, directly recording the sites in modern painterly idioms, apart from few illustrations found in the English tourist's travelogues. Six of the paintings are oil on canvas and one is tempera on paper. All the paintings depict serene, mighty mountains, coddling within the purity of tender white ice and snow, moving clouds, everything "unmarked by any human footprint." The naturally formed ice stalagmite, which is worshipped as Shivalinga, is painted in tempera in a pointillist technique,<sup>41</sup> credibly to universalise the divine subject with a primeval medium of sacred paintings. Depiction of the mountains, strong and structured compendiums of solid rock, creates a sense of post-impressionist order and structure to the paintings, though the wilderness of the landscape is depicted mostly through impressionist strokes

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<sup>38</sup> Enclosure to Letter dated New Delhi, 14 June 1948, from J. Nehru, prime Minister of India, to Abul Kalam Azad, Minister for Education.

<sup>39</sup> V. C. Scott O'Connor's description of Amarnath from his book "The Charm of Kashmir" published in 1920. O'Connor's book has used mythological paintings of Abanindranath Tagore to illustrate the elusive visual charm missing in his written words.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in P. N. Mago's essay on the Brunners, 'In Search of Spiritualism', 2000

<sup>41</sup> Pointillism refers to a post-impressionistic technique of painting with small, distinct dots of color, applied in organised patterns to form a uniform image. It was developed by Georges Seurat and Paul Signac in 1886 as a departure from traditional painting method of blending pigments on palette.

and thick textures. A logic of geometric division of space defines the frames through which the scenes are observed, and paintings are composed. Techniques like use of contrasting colours to define surface and form, less stress on accuracy in drawing, parallel brushstrokes, indicates Brunner's post-impressionist leanings. These post-impressionistic features of romantic landscape paintings are a stylistic extension of artistic benchmarks set by impressionism. These methods were inherited by Brunner from her previous associations with Nagybánya School, which had brought the practice of impressionist aesthetics to Hungary.<sup>42</sup> The cyan-white impasto depicting two Sheshnag Lake images, surrounded by limestone rocks and melting white glaciers, arouse a resemblance with the auspicious ocean of milk narrative and will appeal to memory of a viewer, aware of its popularised mythological account. We already know of Sass Brunner's association with spiritual groups in the 1920s in Hungary where she was exposed to translations of the oriental religious literature and epics.<sup>43</sup> In this context, her presumed assertiveness of Amarnath as an eternal spiritual subject requires further investigation.

From the early days of colonial-orientalist knowledge production, there has been a common strategy to plant Brahminical symbols at all corners of the subcontinent, which continues with the nationalist resurgence of history. In the nationalist project of multiculturalism, a methodical adjustment of distinct regions together within one inclusive cultural Hinduist affiliation through mythicization and appropriation, was devised. Amarnath, was one of them and as a threshold to "Indian Culture" was used to play a crucial role in the Kashmir frontier. Harvesting the myth of Amarnath started much earlier, possibly with the Dogra dynasty's exertion in adopting a Hindu Rajput identity, through which they could claim ethnic sovereignty before the British crown and its own subjects in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Since the discovery of Amarnath<sup>44</sup> in the 1850s, the then Dogra king Gulab Singh, had made frequent pilgrimages to Amarnath, alongside revered sites of

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<sup>42</sup> Sass Brunner's long relationship with Nagybánya School, Gödöllő Artist's Colony and influences of prevailing European art movements, such as Symbolism, Pointillism and Arts and Crafts Movement, also shaped her artistic dialects. Art critic Jaya Appasamy, in her introduction to the book, *A Vision of India*, 1979, has categorized Brunner's works in different themes based on external subjects and inner visions, like visionary paintings, landscape, portraiture, iconic paintings etc.

<sup>43</sup> In late 1920s, renowned Hungarian painter-Indologist Ervin Baktay (uncle of artist Amrita Shergil) had published his first translations of Hindu literary texts in Hungarian after his first visit to India. During this trip Baktay spent a few days in Kashmir with another Hungarian archaeologist Marc Aurel Stein, the translator of 12th century Sanskrit text, *Rajatarangini* of Kalhana. Stein's English translation of *Rajatarangini*, mentions a pilgrimage to Amaresvara, which he hypothetically locates with existing trend of Amarnath pilgrimage, expressing his doubt of its ancient existence (Stein, 1900, vol 1, p. 40-41). It is very likely that the spiritually inclined Sass Brunner was aware of these works even before she arrived in India and the Amarnath images, one can assume, were informed with her literary learnings.

<sup>44</sup> There has been a legend that the cave of Amarnath was discovered by a Gujjar shepherd called Buta Mallik from Batkote, a village near Pahalgam around 1850. Maharaja Gulab Singh, granted him an estate near Pahalgam and allowed his family a share in the offerings made at the shrine.

Aryavarta like Haridwar and Varanasi, trying to elevate it into a legitimate seat of Brahminical importance. He eventually invited the representatives of Varanasi's the Dashnami Akhara to set up their institution in Kashmir and introduced the practice of carrying the mace to the cave during the annual yatra to Amarnath in the 1870s. Dogras also formed Dharmarth Trust to make repairs of ruined temple sites on the pilgrimage route to Amarnath. During the reign of one of his successors Pratap Singh in 1917, Hindu Sahayak Sabha, a society of savarna Punjabi Hindu and Arya Samajists, extended their religious reform mission into serving the pilgrims on the way to Amarnath (Rai, 2004). Such philanthropic conducts, like providing accommodation to the Hindus participating in the annual pilgrimage to Amarnath, and was rewarded by the state, with land grants for the construction of their permanent office in Srinagar. Native Kashmiri Brahmins, the oldest Shaivites in the region were unreceptive to such developments in the share of state power. For them, the Haramukuta and Harmukh Gangabal were holiest sites (Navlakha, 2008). Colonial and Nationalist epistemologies simultaneously groomed the myth of Amarnath, often through reviving and referencing medieval Sanskrit and Persian texts. Nehru's brother-in-law and nationalist comrade Ranjit Sitaram Pandit's 1935 translation of Rajatarangini is a product of this process. Pandit confidently replaces Amaresvara with Amarnath in his translation and claimed its continuity as a popular pilgrimage site since pre-Kalhana period, that is before the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE (Pandit, 1935, p.38). Hence legitimised within the framework of national culture, Amarnath has been continually evoked by Indian state to expand its interests in Kashmir.<sup>45</sup>

The course of events from Brunner's pilgrimage and projection of universality to Amarnath through paintings, their acquisition by Nehru, conferring them the status of national asset and finally, their inclusion to the core body of NGMA collection, should be seen in the light of the above discussion. Brunner's artistic philosophy was comfortably superimposed with the appropriating processes of the nationalist intelligentsia. In a 1957 essay, Ranjee Shahani quite rightfully noted:

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<sup>45</sup> By mid 1960s, with some indication of political normalcy in the occupied valley, state tourism started projecting peaceful conduct of yatra as a symbol of secularism and brotherhood between Kashmiri Muslim and Pandits. Up to 1980s just a few thousand people annually participated in the yatra, among them half of the yatris were sadhus. Yatris were from Jammu, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab and hardly any from other Indian states. But it was in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with active intervention of Indian state, the number of yatris grew from a mere 2000 in 1980 to 42,000 in 1985 and duration of yatra was increased as well. Repeated state support and popularisation of the pilgrimage by routinely conducting yangnas and darshans at Amarnath by the State Governors and other religious-cultural agents, was further regulated with the formation of Shri Amarnath Shrine Board (SASB) by an Act of the Jammu & Kashmir State Legislature in 2000. After several attempts to acquire land for construction of infrastructure for the Yatra from 2005 onwards, finally in 2008 the state cabinet's approval to divert 39.88 hectares of forest land to the board and later revocation of the order, resulted in extensive protests across the valley and a backlash by various state actors, furthering Indian position in the state. See 'Amarnath Yatra: A Militarized Pilgrimage', report published by JKCCS (2017), Gautam Navlakha's 'State Cultivation of the Amarnath Yatra', (2008) and Meera Nanda's 'God Delusion at Work: My Indian Travel Diary' (2008),

Mrs Brunner's contribution is priceless: she makes us see the unknown that we had forgotten was there. In brief, she gave back to us something of glory that is India. She is, as I see her, not a mere recorder or painter. She is a revealer .... While Gandhiji and Nehru were fighting for our freedom, Mrs. Brunner was quietly supplying to our lost psyche.<sup>46</sup>

Along with imperial interests, Nehru's own fantasy of being a son of the soil, thus a lawful inheritor of its symbols, played a major role. In this scope of discussion, it's worth mentioning that once Nehru himself made a failed attempt to visit the Amarnath cave in 1916.<sup>47</sup> Again, during his 1940 trip, to his "great regret" Nehru missed visiting the Sheshnag Lake, "which was the next stage on the journey to the cave of Amarnath" due to lack of time. However, Nehru returned satisfied:

I wanted to crowd as much of experience and sensations as I could during these few days, to fill the storehouse of my memory with a picture gallery which I could visit at leisure when I chose to. (Nehru, 1948, p. 234)

On reading this sensational record from Nehru's visit to Kashmir and its higher valleys in May 1940, one finds the spirit of Nehru's incomplete cerebral "picture gallery" is actually materialising itself into completeness in the series of pictorial constructions by Brunner. These images of Amarnath thus aid two anxieties of the sovereign state. Firstly, the artist's axiomatic eternalization of the mythical subject was precisely synchronised with the need for validation of a unified nation with prominent Brahminical affiliation. Secondly, the images, in their obscure modernist appearance, rightfully delivered what Nehru could not see but wanted to see. Nehru's eyes being the eyes of the Nation and Nehru's heart being the heart of a Kashmiri Brahmin, the natural heir of Kashmir's heritage, were alert enough to identify them.

The eighth painting, an oil on canvas, 'Evening Prayer with Gandhiji at sunset' is another manifestation of mystic India, personified in its essential human demigod subject, MK Gandhi. Brunners wanted to paint Gandhi during their short visit to the Sabarmati Ashram in November 1932, but since Gandhi was in prison, this wish remained unfulfilled. However, they stayed and observed the strict disciplines, realized a "sense of unity" with the spiritual community in the ashram. Sass Brunner wrote:

This power (of freedom) does not ask questions, just carries me away. ... this love, this power, this supreme extraordinary driving force is embodied in Gandhi, the

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<sup>46</sup> From Ranjee Shahani's 1957 article 'Innocence of Eye, Sass Brunner: Woman and Artist'

<sup>47</sup> This was immediately after his marriage with Kamala Kaul when they had spent a few months in Kashmir in the summer of 1916. Nehru almost fell into a wide crevasse on the way to Amarnath and the plan to visit the shrine was abandoned due to increasing difficulties on the route.

Mahatma...This is a power that frightens no-one and is never frightened – it exists and keeps the whole world in motion.”<sup>48</sup>

They finally met Gandhi in Bangalore during his South India trip in the winter of 1934, while Brunners were guests at the Theosophical Society. On 8<sup>th</sup> January 1934 Brunners got an appointment with Gandhi to fulfil an old wish of painting his portrait. Elizabeth Brunner painted Gandhi which made headlines in the press, “Hungarian artist paints the Mahatma in half an hour” and Sass Brunner finally had her opportunity to paint ‘Evening Prayer with Gandhiji at sunset’, the painting currently under discussion.

It depicts a massive crowd of men, women, and children, dressed alike in indigenous attire, seated encircling in their respective gendered segments around a gigantic ancient banyan tree, under which Gandhi is seated in deep meditation with four female associates. The painting has symbolism and post-impressionistic features, like geometric division in composition, the dominating solid structure of banyan tree and exceptional prominence of light in the evening sky, painted with impressionistic bright yellow, progressively blending into saffron-orange on the edge of the earth. The mass or audience of the prayer is represented with uniformly encircling patterns of dotted heads similar to pointillist optical effect. The Mahatma’s presence, within an arbitrary mass of faceless, identity-less bodies covered in white handwoven regiment of khadi, indoctrinated by the bewilderment of Mahatma’s “fleeting phantom”<sup>49</sup> is the central emphasis in the image. Clearly appropriated from the popular Buddhist iconography of Bodhi (wisdom) tree and enlightenment,<sup>50</sup> this image transplanted existing visual legitimacy on the enduring Gandhian self-image management, endorsing the centralised authority of the mega politician saint. For Brunner, painting Gandhi was an act of undisputed spiritual submission to the gentle power of the great saint of the East. Gandhism, represented everything that encompassed Brunner’s mystic India, from Aryan foundation and ancient wisdom to return to self-sufficient village republics and rejection of western civilization.

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<sup>48</sup> Géza Bethlenfalvy, *Tiszta élet öröm*. In memoriam Sass Brunner Erzsébet 1889–1950, quoted by Zsuzsanna Renner

<sup>49</sup> During a conversation between MK Gandhi and Dr. BR Ambedkar on August 14, 1931, while responding to Gandhi and Congress’s claims for the cause of the Untouchables, Dr Ambedkar said, “We are not prepared to have faith in great leaders and Mahatmas. Let me be brutally frank about it. History tells that Mahatmas, like fleeting phantoms, raise dust, but raise no level...Gandhiji, I have no homeland.”

<sup>50</sup> Around the same time Sass Brunner was also painting a series called ‘The Buddha’s Enlightenment’. She had supposedly reached to a synthesis of form and spiritual content after studying visual representations in classical Indian sculpture. One can assume that Brunner probably had picked up from the available template of her own images on Buddha or Buddhist sculpture/painting while depicting Gandhi. Simultaneously she was also painting subjects like Christ, Shiva and Trimurti in 1934.

However, it is well known, that Gandhism, “another form of Sanatanism,” had different implications on the fortunes of the historically oppressed of the subcontinent. As Dr. Ambedkar says, “To omit to take into account the economic and social philosophy of Gandhism is to present deliberately a false picture of Gandhism.” (Ambedkar, 1946) Just a year ago, over an intimidating “Epic Fast unto Death” in Yerwada Central Jail in Poona, Gandhi was using his gentle power to morally blackmail Dr B R Ambedkar to withdraw all distinct constitutional recognition and rights that granted separate electorates for the Backward Classes in Ramsay MacDonald's Communal Award, which resulted in the infamous Poona Pact.<sup>51</sup> In disguise of a defender of the peasants and working class, he protected the economic interests of the propertied class, as he didn't “wish to destroy the hen that lays the golden egg.” He had weaponised political self-starvation to realize these objectives, habitually safeguarding the governing classes. After the Poona Pact, Gandhi is known to have observed a symbolic twenty-one-day “self-purification fast” against untouchability. The artist in discussion is also known to have observed a twenty-eight-day fast, in an act of self-purification in 1925. She could find its ultimate spiritual validity in the ethos of Gandhism, which desired to gain mass appeal by politicising acts of self-sabotage. Gandhi and Brunner's shared natures of idealistic obsessions, intersecting self-class-interests, conviction of spiritual symbolism, explicit display of abstinence and orthodox inclination towards anti-materialist ideology, which were constructions of the modernist project, which they used to strategically escape from modernism itself! None of these vulnerabilities ever threatened their existence in an increasingly modern world, rather they are a set of cultural prerequisites that defines their genius, Gandhi as mega saint politician, Sass Brunner as recluse saint artist. Brunner's hysterical perceptions of Gandhi justifies hegemonic nationalist project in her painted pictures. Such symbolic yet sublime representation of the national icon was evidently to become the ideal memorabilia for the Nehruvian project, particularly after the demise of Gandhi. As Nehru, himself echoed before the celebration of first Gandhi Jayanti after Gandhi's death, “...in addition to this (ceremonial meetings) some more visible symbol is necessary and that is offered by the Memorial Fund which has been raised to further that message.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Claiming himself to be greatest friend of the depressed classes, Gandhi gave this mandate in excuse of preserving the Hindu unity by preventing Backward Class's separation from the “Hindu fold,” blocking their initial means of self-determination. By early 1930s amidst the growing self-affirmation of several lower castes and prominence of Dr. Ambedkar in the political horizon, Gandhi's faith shifted to varna from caste, as he started stressing on the “law of varna in Hinduism,” as “four universal occupations...common to all mankind.” Reinforcing the unified Hindu Society saga re-established that all depressed classes should be under the mercy of their natural leaders, the governing class of brahmin savarnas for their welfare. Gandhi also took this opportunity to assert Hindu unity as an essential component of National unity by connecting it to the anti-colonial politics. Dr. Ambedkar has extensively recorded the unfolding of tyrannical events around Poona Pact in his book ‘What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables’ (1946).

<sup>52</sup> Quoted from ‘Message on the occasion of the Gandhi Birthday-Week’, 27 September 1948. From National Herald, 28 September 1948, published in, ‘Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Second Series, Volume Seven’, 1988, (p. 135).



## **Bureaucratic Correspondence and the Reluctant Art Experts**

Nehru's letter to Azad regarding the acquisition of paintings was followed by a chain of correspondence.<sup>53</sup> Initially, there was a confusion of how to acquire the paintings and what are the appropriate bureaucratic machineries that have the sovereign right to initiate the process of "owning" for the Nation. The total cost of the eight paintings as quoted to Nehru by the artist was Rs-15,000/- and there was confusion of whether the Finance ministry had to approve it. After confirmation from the Education Minister, the ministry started taking the required steps. The officials in the ministry wanted to evaluate the paintings through the state experts before their acquisition and Ramendranath Chakravorty, the then Chief Artist in the Publications Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting was given this responsibility. Chakravorty assessed, "Neither in technique nor in execution does any one of them appear to me to be high artistic merit, and the prices quoted are, in my opinion exorbitant" and the price "may be about Rs 500/- each." But Nehru had not only given his word to the Brunners but already had the paintings transported and exhibited in the Prime Minister's residence in New Delhi. So, the acquisition couldn't be evaded, and the education ministry chose Barada Ukil, General Secretary of All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society as the next 'expert artist or art critic' to examine the paintings. After carefully examining the paintings, Barada Ukil wrote to the ministry, "... the paintings are not of high quality and the price asked for by the artist is not only exorbitant but absurd...If the Government of India are at all keen on purchasing these mediocre work of art, Rs 500/- a piece is the maximum price that I can recommend." Both these assessments were communicated to the Prime Minister's office and PM's permission was sought for negotiation with the artist by the Education Ministry, with an offer of Rs 4,000/- for the entire lot.

Apart from this being an assessment of a foreigner artist's works meant for the National Museum, the state-appointed art critic's low opinion of the paintings can be viewed in equivalence to the ongoing contesting artistic trends and standards of what came to be defined as "Modern" and "Indian" in art. Ramendranath Chakravorty was trained in Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan under the renowned Gandhian artist and pedagogue Nandalal Bose and later at Slade School of Art, London. Under Rabindranath Tagore's philosophical framework of unity in community and nature, his practice was imbedded in Santiniketan's National Modern programme, employing localism and immediate natural subject. This was broadly aimed at the realization of a new indigenous which progressively unpacks itself into the logic of national. Ramendranath, primarily a printmaker was an advocate of realist naturalism and concerned with accurate application of appropriate techniques. Overt sentimentalism and iconic symbolism of Brunner's images probably didn't fall under his parameters of appreciation. Barada Ukil, a painter turned art critic and administrator

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<sup>53</sup> This entire correspondence is published in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of B. P. Singh's 'India's Culture: The State, the Arts, and Beyond' (2009)

came from the lineage of Bengal School.<sup>54</sup> He and his brothers, all students of Abanindranath Tagore, aspired to introduce a fresh Pan-Indian art-cultural environment in New Delhi, lately established as the capital of British India in the 1920s. By 1926, Ukil brothers had established the first private art school in New Delhi and were also instrumental in forming All India Fine Arts & Crafts Society (AIFACS) later in 1929. Barada Ukil eventually became the chairman of AIFACS and a distinguished writer and editor of its illustrated quarterly art journal, called *Roopa-Lekha*.<sup>55</sup> But amid rising environment of experiments in art, Barada Ukil remained a staunch Bengal School Orientalist by ideological conviction and believed that it's revivalist agenda represented "feeling of the people," which he found missing in most modern artworks of his time, including of Amrita Shergil's (Chaitanya, 1976). In this view, Barada's assessment of Brunner's paintings is compelled to be of low remark, as their version of impressionist sentimentalism differs from that of Bengal School's conscious anti-materialist mushiness.

The pictorial-thematic supplement of these images appealed distinctly to Nehru's scheme of the nation than those of the nationalist Bengali art critics. A puzzled Nehru personally wrote to Azad on 21st September, expressing his utter surprise and rather a disagreement with the expert opinion. He countered his case informing that he had personally purchased four paintings for Rs 5000/- from the Brunners, among them three were mountain scenes and one was of Mahatma Gandhi, which Sass Brunner quite unwillingly sold him at Rs 3500/- and "The pictures at the Government house are on a bigger scale and personally I think they are exceedingly good. Mahatma Gandhi at a prayer meeting appears to me to be a fascinating picture which grows upon me. To value it at Rs 500/- seems to me very wide and mark." He instructed the Education Ministry to send a request to Mrs. Brunner suggesting a "slight reduction" by stating the advice of the expert opinions but without mentioning their quoted prices. But he was quite sure that the artist won't consider any lower figure. So, he concluded saying, "If it is not possible for the Government of India to acquire these pictures, I feel I am committed, and I should buy them myself at the price stated." After this 3-month-long correspondence and amidst the difference of opinion, "where personal taste plays

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<sup>54</sup> Bengal School is an artistic ideology that prioritised indigenous imperial cultural heritage as a source of modern aesthetics over western art, reinforced by a renewed interest in classical-folk-spiritual-mythological subjects. In early 20th century Calcutta, it's style and perspectives were developed by Abanindranath Tagore with active support from Ernest Binfield Havell. Bengal School's pedigree was located in its denunciation of Western colonial aesthetic standards propagated through School of Art and Draughtsmanship in Calcutta, from the second half of 19th century.

<sup>55</sup> Barada's elder brother Sarada Ukil received international acclaim as an ambassador of Indian painterly qualities. Barada Ukil, being one of the founders and chairman of the eminent organization, AIFACS had high-profile connections and was instrumental in lobbying with the Government and conducting exhibitions in India and abroad which promoted young artists. He possessed extraordinary power and influence among the art circles. Today, there is even a road named after him in central Delhi, leading to India Gate.

an important part” Azad finally directed his ministry to sanction the bill and arrange for payment, formally ending the acquisition of the paintings on 23rd September 1948.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

Nehru was determined to not let go of the Kashmir paintings as they should ideally belong to the nation, even at the “wide off the mark” assessment of the state art critics. He had a similar attitude against letting go of the state in realpolitik too, as he whispered, “As Calais was written on Queen Mary’s heart, so Kashmir is written on mine.” to the Commander of the Pakistan Army, General Frank Messervy, in a private conversation in 1948 (French, 1998, p. 372). Indian State’s acquisition of aesthetic objects, building nation’s cultural heritage, cannot be seen outside the orbit of imperialist impulse of power and culture. As colonial state institutions and native elite run art-cultural initiatives were the holy sites where defining of all the contestations of self-defined ‘ancient’, ‘medieval’, ‘indigenous’, ‘modern’ and finally ‘Indian’, took place from the late 19th century. Then there were innumerable unattended facades in outlying geographical belts or indifferent other social spaces, which Indian State claimed to be within its confines, but where no orientalist or native virtuoso had ever gone in quest of India or no Brahminical connotations were readily available. In these places, ethnographic state surveillance ensured ‘discovery’ of regional material traditions, which were often artisanal products of oppressive caste and traditional occupations, to bridge the missing link of nation’s cultural heritage. The formation of The All India Handicrafts Board is marked with this significance. Inherited from colonial epistemology, Nation’s ethnographic gaze was contented under Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay’s leadership.<sup>57</sup> A consolidated national framework of indigenous and folk design was defined by fetching the material, commercial and cultural produces from the local economies of producing societies among the Dalit, Bahujan, Pasmada, and Adivasi. Inclusions of all new produce into this national network of craft design, were freshly theorized evoking art and design canons from long-dead Shilpa

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<sup>56</sup> The Brunner paintings remained in the Prime Minister’s residence till April 1949 when they were moved to the Government house for “a private view” arranged in the Council of State Chamber of the pictures in the possession of the Govt, of India, “for the benefit of the members of the National Commission and their guests attending the opening meeting.” A correspondence between the Prime Minister’s Secretariat and the Ministry of Education on March 1951 discloses that these paintings, with others, including Amrita Shergil works, were sent to the Central Asian Antiquities Museum, in view of keeping them within the observance of the ministry. After the inauguration of the National Gallery of Modern Art in March 1954 at the high-profile Jaipur House, these paintings were added to the its core collection of Modern Indian Art. In 2001, after the death of Elizabeth Brunner, 800 paintings of Brunner’s were handed over to India Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA). They are preserved in IGNCA’s Cultural Archives and have been documented, catalogued and made available on IGNCA’s website.

<sup>57</sup> Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903-1988) was a socialist, nationalist and conservationist who belonged to Saraswat Brahmin family of Mangalore. She founded the All-India Women's Conference and an active participant in Gandhian politics before independence. She was instrumental in setting up the All India Handicrafts Board and was also its first chairperson. She is also credited for establishment of National School of Drama, Akademis and crafts museums, including the National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum in Delhi.

Shastras. The varna ideology of mental-material stagnancy was at the core of this process, as a concerned Kamaladevi wrote in 1961, “Under the pressure of new influences, often very alien, in the sense of not having any kinship with our background or environment or way of life, the original concepts of design have tended to become distorted and sometimes destroyed.”<sup>58</sup> Long back, Gandhi had mastered this gaze and realizing its capitalizing potential, had implanted it into the mainstream nationalist discourse. Under this Gandhian impulse and in disguise of socialist welfare state, handicraft and textile policies chained artisanal communities to their caste occupations, socially economically denying them participation in modern means of life. The Crafts Museum through a regime of craft revival and technical demonstration programmes, stressed in incorporating crafts and handlooms, while largely drawing them from the North-Eastern regions. The National Museum too dedicated a gallery to the ‘Tribal Lifestyle of North-East India’ acquiring various objects of cultural significance of North Eastern Tribes. But this cultural annexation was simultaneous with the Indian state seizing and repressing freedom seeking North Eastern States through military occupation, waging war against their entire populations. The National Institute of Design (NID) was established in 1961, with the aim to bridge between ‘age old traditions’ and modern ‘machine aesthetics’ through research and design education.<sup>59</sup> They, alongside the anthropology departments of Indian universities, engaged in maximum capitalization on Bahujan cultures through appropriation and knowledge production. For the state, culture became the only indicator for their acknowledgment within nation. While their culture was termed synonymous to their historical existence, their political agency was denied and repressed.

One can see the differing facades of national culture, one invested with the historical, cultural and modernist urge, another restrained with an anthropological and commercial gaze. Given the difference, they were assigned with different national duties leading to similar goals. Both enterprises as apparatuses of nation building were commanded by the Brahmin Savarnas, the historical governing classes, who chiefly attended to their own class-caste interests by keeping Bahujan rights at their convenience while the state took care of keeping Bahujan rage under control. Within the larger spectrum of a desired national; containment of this antithesis of nation was managed with artistic programmes and cultural acquisitions.

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<sup>58</sup> ‘Foreword’ of Craft Designs, a design album by All India Handicrafts Board (1961)

<sup>59</sup> NID was established by the Government of India as an autonomous institution for Industrial Design in September 1961 at Ahmedabad with the financial assistance of the Ford Foundation and Sarabhai family. NID originated from active initiative of Pupul Jayaker, a Gujarati Brahmin and founder-director of the Indian Handlooms and Handicrafts Export Council. It was followed by the recommendations of the India Report made by American designers, Charles and Ray Eames.

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