

AMRITA SHER-GIL: A LIFE

By Yoshodhara Dalmia

Published by Penguin Viking

Pages: 230 Price: Rs.695

A Review by Mita Ghose

Star allure, they say, cannot stand up to scrutiny. It is, therefore, a mystery as to how the radiance of Amrita Sher-Gil's image remains undiminished in our collective consciousness despite the relentless exposure to which her life and death have been subjected over the years. What is the secret of this painter's enduring appeal? Her striking Indo-Hungarian looks, or her compelling presence that held others spellbound? Her distinctive artistic expression or the astronomical prices her works command today?

Her brief, turbulent life which inspires wonder or her tragic death that will remain forever shrouded in lurid speculation? Given the elusiveness of the answer, the challenge of getting to the heart of such a complex personality is a daunting one. For Yoshodhara Dalmia, it could hardly have been made easier by the six decades or so that have elapsed since Sher-Gil's death, the demise of some of the key people in her life like her cousin and husband Dr. Victor Egan and the lack of cooperation from her descendants. That the author of *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Life* has managed to work around such hurdles and explore her subject's art, life and "angst-ridden internal landscape" with the sensitivity and detachment it deserves is a measure of her achievement as a biographer.

An art historian who takes her *métier* seriously, Dalmia traces Sher-Gil's evolution as a painter with assurance, examining in meticulous detail the themes and moods of her canvases which wedded modern European influences to Indian aesthetic traditions with "power and originality". It is, however, in her incisive portrayal of the individual behind the artist's larger-than-life image that the author leaves an impact. Her strategy of allowing Sher-Gil to take centre stage by quoting extensively from her personal correspondence is a shrewd one. A goldmine of intimate revelations, the letters afford penetrating insights into Amrita's varied equations with her husband, parents, sister and close circle of friends including her mentor, art connoisseur Karl Khandalavala, and a smitten Jawaharlal Nehru.

While the missives addressed to her are undoubtedly eloquent, Sher-Gil's own epistolary voice captivates with its felicity of expression and diverse moods - pensive, witty, impassioned, indignant, scathing, reproachful, imploring and often, heartbreakingly sad. Betraying her angst over her conflicted sense of self that originated from the dichotomy between her confidence in her strength as an artist and her utter lack of self-worth as a human being, it is the voice of a woman whose charisma and formidable talent could never entirely save her from the despair of contemplating, the "unending succession of voids" she saw stretching before her.

But it another Sher-Gil who emerges from the observations, diary entries and excerpts from writings by the many others who knew her. Vivan Sundaram, her nephew, who refused to have anything to do with this biography, has written of the Amrita who was not above exploiting the very people and institutions she mocked. Writer Khushwant Singh depicts her as an unfeeling "nymphomaniac". Journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, her "kindered spirit" and one-time lover, describes her at a given moment as a "coarse, petulantly spoilt" woman who remained, at heart, a "virgin" despite her obsession with her sexual conquests. Rashid Ahmed, former director-general of Radio Pakistan, corroborates this impression by referring to the "hard core of the artist that keeps itself aloof and untouched".

If this appears to point to the "bleak, self-centered orientation" that drives creative genius everywhere, Dalmia balances it with glimpses of the disturbing undercurrents in the Sher-Gil

home that may well have played a part in widening the fissures in Amrita's psyche. Her Sikh father's attitude of polite reproach to the unconventional life she chose to lead the permanent shadow cast over her marriage by her socially ambitious Hungarian mother's open contempt for Victor as an unworthy partner for her desirable first-born and her sister Indira's resentment at being upstaged by her older sibling's greater beauty, accomplishments and social success caused the sensitive Sher-Gil untold anguish.

The artist was fortunate, however, in her fiercely loyal friends. Her staunchest ally was, perhaps, her husband with whom she apparently shared the strangest of relationships. During Sher-Gil's lifetime, Victor would not only sacrifice his professional ambitions in favour of her artistic ones, but seemed content to forego the joys of fatherhood because children did not figure in his wife's scheme of things. He is alleged to have condoned her extramarital affairs, even performing, illegal abortions for her when she became pregnant by other men. In fact, Amrita's mother would hold him responsible for her death at 28 from complications following an abortion he supposedly performed on her; though Dalmia, in all fairness, offers us several conflicting versions of the tragedy.

Interestingly, Sher-Gil claims to have chosen Victor over more eligible suitors because he understood her perfectly. Whether she understood him as well is a question that needs to be pondered, for the author surprises us with a deeply sympathetic portrait of a man who would, curiously enough, come into his own only after Amrita was gone. One cannot help wondering whether the positive light in which he is cast in this book has anything to do with the many inputs offered by his second wife, Nina Hydrie, and the two daughters she bore him.

Apparently ineffectual and unmotivated in Amrita's lifetime, Victor seems to have become something of a legend as a selfless and capable doctor following her demise. Just as significant, given his initial decision not father children, was his devotion to his daughters, Eva and Juliet, who remember him as a doting parent. If it took Sher-Gil's death to liberate Victor, granting him the freedom to evolve and realise his true potential, what kind of oppressive shadow, one wonders, had she cast over him while she lived? What kind of emasculating effect must she have had on his personality? What kind of woman would do that to a man who loved her unconditionally?

Who was the real Amrita? Dalmia comes full circle, but refrains from tying herself down to facile inferences. Rather, she leaves us with many more questions about her subject and the inevitability of the blame game that will continue to be played as long as public interest in Sher-Gil survives. Will we ever cease to ask ourselves whether in the absence of Victor's unstinting support, Amrita would have enjoyed the life she embraced, fulfilled her promise as an artist to the extent she did and become the legend she is today? Then again, assuming the allegations about his involvement in her death are true, would she have lived a long, full life but for him?

In the absence of conclusive answers to this enigma and the many others that surround her still, the debate promises to continue, perpetuating the legend that resists all attempts at demystification. Sher-Gil's destined to live on in our imaginations the way she would have wanted to: a rising star, frozen in time, forever young, forever radiant, forever Amrita.



'DEAR TAKUYA': Letters of a Sikh Boy

By Jessi Kaur. Illustrations by Brian Johnston

Ed. by Manjyot Kaur

Published by International Institute of Gurmat Studies,

Tustin, CA. 92780. USA.

Pages: 50 (Art paper - profusely illustrated) Price: US\$ 14.99

A Review by Saran Singh

Thousands of young Sikhs who have, at one time or another, participated in IIGS summer camps must be familiar with Jessi Kaur - the motivator and story-teller steeped in the Sikh lore. This slim coffee-table size book by her has an ethereal quality derived mainly from the theme as well as the brilliant graphics of the Canadian artist, Brian Johnston. Together they have woven a tapestry around the two pen-pals. Simar Singh, of Sunnyvale school in California, and Takuya - a Japanese boy (with younger 'sisters in pretty kimonos!').

In fact, the letters - entirely a one way traffic - seek to share with a pen-friend, Takuya, the child-like understanding of the Sikh life-style, across the Pacific Ocean. Simar's correspondence dwells on his own observations about the week-end visits to the Gurudwara, prayers recited from the holy Guru Granth, and the sweet Prasad served on the conclusion of every solemn Sunday. Equally interesting is his breezy account of the Summer youth camp and the sessions in romantic history of the Sikhs who seem to emerge triumphant from every ordeal they encounter in the 17th and 18th centuries. Takuya is told about Guru Gobind Singh, riding the 'blue' horse, wearing a plume in royal turban; as also the sacrifice of his four 'sahibzadas' (to whom the book is dedicated). On a deeper moral plane, young Simar writes to Takuya about Guru Nanak's three golden rules: 'Remember God, live honestly and share what you have with others.'

In this charming recital, however, we learn precious little about Takuya's Japanese culture, its history, the Shinto faith, the ancestor worship and the heroic tradition of Samurai warriors - who (much like Sikhs) sported long hair and deemed it an insult to cut the top-knot.

The illustrations, in colour, are utterly lovable, providing a moral dimension to the story of a Faith trying to rediscover its roots in America.



LIVE BEYOND 139 YEARS: JOYOUS & WRINKLE FREE

By Satpal Kaur Sodhi

Publisher: Unistar Books, Sco 26-27, SEC - 34A, Chandigarh. 160022.

Pages: 170 Price: (Paper Back) Rs. 150/-

Halifax (NS) Canada-based Satpal Kaur Sodhi has taught a whole generation of Canada's senior school students. A Psychiatrist and counsellor, she specializes in holistic living, meditation and psycho-spiritual lifestyle. This handy volume is essentially a confidence builder, rooted in Gurbani's

concept of charhdi-kala. Its nine chapters encourage the reader - in chaste English - to be positive in thought, to feel 'empowered' in spirit, to discover divinity within, to control one's temper and practice meditation - attributes embedded in Guru Granth Sahib.

- S.S.

THE SIKHS IN THE NEW CENTURY (A Collection of Essays by eminent writers)

Ed. Harchand Singh Bedi

- Publisher: Principal, Khalsa College, Amritsar. 143002

- Pages 304 Price: (Hardcover) Rs. 200

A brilliant scholar and prolific writer on contemporary themes, Dr. Harchand Singh Bedi's latest publication is, a collection of 21 thought-provoking essays contributed by some of the most eminent scholars from across the globe. A galaxy of educators and intellectuals delve

into modern day problems, as well as opportunities, that confront the Sikh people. Among the issues discussed are: the sociological challenges, including the omnipresent so-called IDENTITY CRISIS, VISION, VALUES & WORLD VIEW' and, on a more cheerful note, the Sikh musicology.

One couldn't have wished for a more distinguished gallery of scholars: we have living legend, like Dr JS Neki, Dr. Ujagar Singh Bawa (USA), GS Dhillon, KS Duggal, Darshan Singh Maini and Dr. Madanjit Kaur. Not that the rest are any-the-less thoughtprovoking! Altogether a stimulating and challenging book, for which Dr. Harchand Singh deserves kudos.

- S.S.

SO SAID GURU ARJAN DEV

'gurU Arjn bcnwvll'

By Harnam Singh Shan, D. Litt

Publisher: Govt. of Punjab, Dept. of Public Relations, Chandigarh.

Pages: 424 (Hardcover) Price: Not mentioned

This book of quotations from Gurbani by the much respected theologian, Dr. Shan, has been sponsored by government of Punjab as a tribute to Sri Guru Granth Sahib. In fact its Foreword has been penned by chief minister, Sardar Parkash Singh Badal. More than 680 verses of Guru Arjan Dev have been arranged in a thematic format, with - curiously - Headings arranged according to the English alphabet. the result is that the sublime has been often rendered in a bathetic phraseology. Sample: 'God's Awareness = gurmukhi or 'oneness of Realty = Gurmukhi, whatever that might mean! In understanding Gurbani, English language is not the best tool, for the Gurbani text, as well as the context, have a profundity and relevance rooted in the whole gamut of human perception of the transcendental Reality.

A handy volume for libraries. Incidentally, the Bhatt Sawayyas would demand that, in English, the Fifth Guru's holy Name should be transcribed as 'Guru Arjun' and not as given in the Title.

- S.S.

'jn praupkwrl Awey'

By Bhai Sahib Harcharan Singh Ji (1913-2005)

Ed. Jaiteg Singh Anant

Publisher: Hari Darshan Mem. Int'l Trust, 1004 Sec. 40-B. Chandigarh.

Pages 156 + 24 + Pictorial Section. Price: Rs. 350/- (US \$20)

This is a touching and eloquent tribute of a son to his saintly father who had dedicated himself to humanitarian goals, in the best tradition of Sikhism, combining piety with public service and philanthropy. He would be best remembered for organising regular kirtan sessions, and setting a personal example of treading the path of a true Gursikh - best illustrated by the photo album at the tail-end.

- S.S.

THE STORY OF THE TURBAN: 'dwsqwn-ey-dsqwr'

By Prof. Asa Singh Ghuman

Publisher: Lokgeet Prakashan, SCO 26-27, Sec. 34A, Chandigarh.

Pages 148. Price: (Hardcover) Rs. 170/-

A delightful narrative, in chaste Punjabi, of how the turban has survived the test and tempest of time, as integral to the Indian - especially the Sikh - *persona*, not merely as a dignified part of dress, but as a testament of honour and valour. In the best tradition of a teacher, Prof. Ghuman traces its historical background, social relevance, its infinite variety and - above all - its moral and religious connotation - integral to the faith it symbolizes. The

jacket illustrations impart a romantic touch to the title.
- S.S.