

## India Diaries

Pallavi Pundir : Sun May 12 2013, 02:32 hrs



The 19th century was a strange period for the Hungarians. At some level, there was a curiosity among Hungarians about Asia being a land of "possible descendents". It's no surprise that in 1926, a 36-year-old Hungarian author, Ervin Baktay came from Budapest to India with questions on his mind. Fascinated by Indian figures such as Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi, he gave up his career as an artist to pursue Indology. After his sister's (Marie Antoniette Gottesmann) marriage to a Sikh scholar named Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, he travelled across India and documented India of that era. His observations remain most relevant in Hungary. Marking Baktay's 50th death anniversary, a photo exhibition titled, "Enchanted by India : Ervin Baktay" at the Hungarian Information and Cultural Centre, is on display and documents his travels through photographs.

Sourced from the private archives of Baktay's family and curated by Zoltan Bonta, 30 photographs show the Indologist, writer and artist in various parts of India between 1926 and 1929. "Baktay's life was spent in making India known to the West. Yet, in India, he is not known because his books were in Hungarian," says Geza Bethlenfalvy, author of *Enchanted by India - Baktay Ervin (1890-1963) Life and Works*, a former Director of the Hungarian Centre and DU professor, who has helped in bringing the exhibition to India.

Among the poignant images on display is that of Umrao Singh-Baktay Gottesmann family; Baktay with Singh in Lahore's Shalimar Garden; in Shimla; on his houseboat in Dal Lake and his last India visit in 1956. One of the photographs show a young Ervin Baktay when he was studying art under Simon Hollosy, the Hungarian pioneer in naturalism and realism. This was also the time he got interested in Asian arts and aesthetics. It was Hollosy's school of art that led him to mentor his niece, Amrita Sher-Gil, who was in Hungary, and encourage her to become an artist. "There is a notebook which shows various drawings by her, which were guided by Baktay," says Bethlenfalvy.

The photographs throw light on just one aspect of Baktay, writing books on India. He authored about 40 books and his most comprehensive ones are *India* (1931), covering everything from the culture to the freedom struggle, and *The Art of India* (1958). His travels further produced titles such as *The Land of the Happy Valley*, *Wanderings in Kashmir* (1934), *The Land of Five Rivers on Punjab* (1937) among others. Another set includes those on Tagore, adaptations of the Mahabharata and Ramayana, and a collection of speeches by Gandhi, and translations of texts such as the *Kamasutra*.

Baktay needed to raise money to aid his travels so he was commissioned by Umrao Singh as their artist. Unfortunately, even though he made multiple paintings on royalty and Indian life, none of them have been found. "They haven't been recognised and Umrao Singh's family doesn't have them either. Private collectors claim to own Baktay paintings, but they have never produced any of them," says Bethlenfalvy, who remembers his one-year class on art by Baktay, in the University in Budapest, before he suffered a fatal heart attack in 1963.

The exhibition is on till May 17 Entry is free