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Baktay's eye on mystical India

TANUSHREE BHASIN 11th May 2013

Originally a student of art, Ervin Baktay came to India after being invited by his sister. Fascinated and enamoured by the country, he gave up painting so that he could study Eastern religion and culture full time. He wrote vociferously and translated a number of Indian texts into his native tongue, including the first Hungarian translation of the *Kama Sutra*. He soon discovered Tagore and popularised his work in Hungary



The Baktay-Gottesmann and Sher-Gil families at Budapest, 1930

On the occasion of his 50th death anniversary, The Hungarian Information and Cultural Centre organised an exhibition of photographs of and by him from his travels through India titled *Enchanted by India*. "This is the first time when we can show how Baktay saw the Indians, the villagers, the noblemen, buildings, architecture and the everyday life of Indians. Obviously then, his point of view is that of a European in India," said Zoltan Bonta, the curator of the show, at a talk organised at India International Centre on Tuesday.

Baktay, a noted Indologist of the early 20th century seems to have embodied the innate dichotomy of the discipline. On one hand, his fascination with India was one of genuine admiration, but at the same time his perception of the country was one based on the notion of India as the 'mystic east'. While he is credited as being the first to popularise Indian culture in Hungary, his work betrays a perception of India as being at odds with the more rational West.

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The photographs trace his journey as he began his career as a painter and art student at Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts under the guidance of Simon Hollósy in Munich. It is here that his interest in the 'Orient' was first roused and he went on to translate and publish the Mahabharata, Ramayana as well as several speeches by Gandhi.

The next set of pictures at the exhibition throw light upon Baktay's visits to India. Most pictures are of his time in Shimla with his sister who was married to Umrao Singh Sher-Gil. It is here that he inspired their daughter Amrita Sher-Gil to paint and instructed her to use the servants of the house as models and paint landscapes.

His travels through the country also dominate the exhibition where he can be seen meeting not only India's leaders and businessmen but also common people with distinct cultural traditions. The perspective is of a curious western man who is intrigued by the culture and lifestyles of the tribes and communities he meets on his journey through Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Tibet.



Zangla, 1982

Baktay went on to write many books about India and continued to educate himself about the country until his last days when he took up the study of Indian art. The exhibition serves as a fitting tribute to the man, highlighting his love for India and offering an interesting glimpse into the India of the thirties and forties, from an outsider's perspective.

Venue: Hungarian Information and Cultural Centre

Date: On till 17 May

Timing: 10am-4pm