

IMPRESSION OF PARTITION ON AMAR NATH SEHGAL'S CREATIONS

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Abstract:

Amar Nath Sehgal was an Indian artist, as a sensitive man who felt all the pains others go through and gave voice to the voiceless. He is a medium through which he shares his grief and pain of the uprooted people who have lost their loved ones during the partition in 1947. Sehgal became the voice of the people whose voices were at no time heard throughout his life. He had worked towards a better world; he called himself a humanist., as this can easily be witnessed in the documents he left behind and is now a single artist museum based in New Delhi. In 1947 when the British left and with the creation of Pakistan, millions were killed, and thousands went missing, women were raped, thousands of children became orphaned; Sehgal witnessed all these horrors of partition. Along with millions uprooted from their ancestral homes, he was also one of them. The partition left an everlasting impact on him who can be seen in his artworks, which his creation describes the horrors he was witness to, and that memory remained with him throughout his life.

The sculptural expression of Sehgal gives justice to his thoughts and feelings. They have a certain kind of scream from the terrors he has witnessed. Sehgal gives careful thought to his works as they always surround the common man and what he faces has to go through, be it happy or sad.

This paper serves the purpose of knowing Amar Nath Sehgal and the impact he had of partition in his creations, and also highlights the sculptural expression reflected in his shaping of artworks.

Keywords: *Amar Nath Sehgal, partition, suffering, traumatized, horrors, Mulk Raj Anand*

Amar Nath Sehgal was born in a large Indian family on 5th February 1922, in Campbellpur district Attock, Pakistan. It was built on the banks of the river Indus. Sehgal was the middle child among his seven siblings. In childhood, he would see clouds, shapes, and forms and even sketch on sand; he would make little clay doodling, which gave him his first exposure to creativity (Sehgal, A Potrait). Sehgal received his early education in his hometown and later graduated from science and government college, Lahore, in 1941 with a distinction in physics. Soon after the passing away of his father, Ram Asra Mal, the following year, he started working as a manager in an electrical company. His family's firm belief in Sehgal's competence took him to Benaras for further study in Science to study industrial chemistry. After realizing that he has his inclination toward arts and facing much criticism and lack of support from his family, he enrolled in the evening batch of Mayo School of Art, Lahore.

Later studied at the Lahore School of Fine arts, also popularly known as Sanyal's Studio, under well-known artist and art educator Bhabesh Chandra Sanyal. Who worked as a strong supportive pillar in his life. After the political shift in 1947, Sehgal witnessed horrors and cataclysm of partition, and along with him, millions were uprooted and displaced from their ancestral homes on both sides. Sehgal and his family had to flee to new and free India and made their challenging way to Kully valley in Himachal.

Two years post-independence, it was 1949, Sehgal boarded the steamer named Harpalycus on his way to America for his further studies at New York University as he had to get away from the sleepless nights from the horrors of partition, Sehgal said, 'When I left my hearth and home after partition I was fully traumatized with anguish and suffering in my heart.' (Sehgal, A Potrait) He completed his M.A. in Art Education in 1950. From 1949 up-till 1950, Sehgal used to work in the studio of Tony Smith and was also working around artists like Rothko, Pollock, and Barnett Newman,

who all appreciated and encouraged him. Lack of funds, an unbalanced emotional state, and being away from family grew into insomnia. To balance his life in New York, he has to seek help from a physiologist.

Lack of funds made Sehgal work odd jobs, and he would paint Christmas dolls, work as a waiter, and lecture at the museum. In 1950, Sehgal established his studio in the village. Following the same year, Sehgal had a solo show at the public library in New Rochelle. The next year 1951, at the young age of twenty-seven, he had his first show at the Arthur U. Newton Galleries in New York. *Sculpture by Amar Nath Sehgal, 1951*, received appreciation and comments from the press. An unfortunate turn of a tragic event in 1951 burnt the artist's studio; most of his works were destroyed in that fire. He nevertheless continued to work in a friend's apartment.

It was the year 1952 when Sehgal had another solo show in New York, *India's Dance Forms*, after which he gained attention and appreciation in the art society, and *The New Yorker* called him '*the talk of the town*' (100 Years of Sehgal, 2022). Soon after, he left New York to study, went to Paris, and traveled extensively to West and East Africa. There he had a solo exhibition at Kampala Jirya, Uganda, East Africa, and was commissioned to create the bust of His Highness Aga Khan.

In March of 1953, Sehgal arrived in Delhi and took the job as an Art teacher in Modern School, Barakhamba Road, wherein, in 1954, he did an open-air show. In the year 1955, Sehgal left his job as a school teacher to organize a government pilot project for the revival of folk arts in Jharsa district, Gurgaon; He believed that the tradition of inheriting design, color, and form from forefathers should be protected even while teaching new techniques and adding functionality in preserving the folk arts (100 Years of Sehgal, 2022). While Sehgal worked in the grassroots community, he learned more about traditional Art, influencing his sculpture.

The same year he took up a UNESCO assignment to study and survey folk arts in India and was appointed as an Art Consultant in the Ministry of Development and cooperation. The year 1957, when Sehgal was awarded National Award from Lalit Kala Akademi for his sculpture 'Onward march' and was awarded Golden Plaque (President's Award) for his work, 'Cries Unheard', National Exhibition of Art by Lalit Kala Akademi. A bronze statue of Mahatma Gandhi was commissioned by the Amritsar Municipal Committee to be installed in Ram Bagh Garden, Punjab. 1961, during Pakistan's tour to India, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru gifted the sculpture '*cricketer*' to the Pakistani cricket team. In 1962, Sehgal completed the 2000sq feet bronze mural at the India International Conference building, Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi, commissioned in 1957. The Government dismantled the mural

Being a sculptor was a tough job to survive, and artists often relied on the commission of busts; it was in 1963 when Sehgal had commissioned statues of various influential people like Late SWRD Bandaranaike, former Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, freedom fighter Late Lala Lajpat Rai, Late Ballabh Pant.

Sehgal donated his Golden Plaque to the National Defense Fund the following year during the Indo-China war.

In the same year, a 7ft bronze sculpture, 'To space Unknown,' was gifted to the USSR government by the Government of India. In 1964 Sehgal received a scholarship to travel to the USA, Scandinavia, Germany, and France from the Ford Foundation and held a Solo exhibition in Belgrade on the invitation of the Yugoslav Government, followed by a One-man show in Paulskirche, Frankfurt. A commission from the French Ministry of Culture was sent to explore the possibility of sponsoring an exhibition of Sehgal at the Museum of Modern Art, Paris, which later happened in 1965.

1965 Sehgal had his Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, which Jean Cassau curated. It was a big achievement for Sehgal as he said, 'When he was invited to Paris, Museum of Modern Art, which is one of the greatest museums of the world where even Picasso and other great artists were respected and there when he felt that his work was understood, big halls of the museum were open for his work, Oneman show, he felt that his works were worthy enough to be reviewed by people.' (Sehgal, A Potrait)

'One cannot but be impressed by his expressive power, a power invested with great mildness, rather pliable and insinuating than percussive, but irresistible. this is due; we should like to insist on that point, to all the compelling drama with which it is loaded.'

His Art is not contemplative, nor does it induce contemplation.

It invites us to take part; it forces us to admit and accept for ourselves the conflicts, cries, and Anguish with which it is loaded.

Sehgal's Art is, therefore, always full of meaning, full of great ideas, which play a part, not in the abstract philosophical systems, in the comedy of concepts, but rather in the tragedy of man and his destiny. These ideas are perceptible and stir us to the deepest of our beings. That is why the shapes which translate them are pure and bare. Their value lies in movements and their rhythm.

And this rhythm translates the great alliance of strength and grace to which we had just referred. It is a great honor for the National Museum of Modern Art to welcome the Exhibition. Jean Cassou, Curator, Museum of Modern Art, Paris, 1965. (Amar Nath Sehgal Private Collection Archives)

This opened a window of opportunity for Sehgal to exhibit a series of exhibitions and shows all over Europe; he was introduced to the German audience in 1965-66. Following a series of shows in Brussels, Ghent, Luxembourg, Sculpture Biennale, Rodin Museum, Paris, and Haus Am Lützowplatz, Berlin in 1966. After one year of staying in Brussels with his family and displaying a Solo exhibition at Galerie Brassau, Luxembourg, and One man show at Flemish Akademi of Art, Antwerp, Belgium, Sehgal moved back to India in 1967.

Expression of the traumatic experience of partition took shape, and 'Anguished Cries' was erected in the shadow Berlin Wall in 1974, which politicians like Willy Brandt praised. In 1972, the National Gallery of Modern Art sponsored a solo exhibition, *Amar Nath Sehgal-Selected Sculptures, Graphics and Drawing 1947-1972*, which coincided with the 25th Independence Day in India. Dr. Mulk Raj Anand had then described his works as, 'Creative art is the necessary instrument of the efforts implicit in the human metabolism to perfect itself, to enable the inner vitalities to flow across inhibitions, frustrations and handicaps in the evolution towards wholeness'. (Anand, 1993)

Later that year, a sculpture by Sehgal, ' *Monument to Aviation*, ' was installed at Palam Airport, New Delhi.

Sehgal is a sensitive person who feels everything going on with him and the society, he used to express the grief and void through his art sculpture, drawings, and prints, but he also through his writings and published his book *Der Inner Rhythmus*, a collection of his poems in the year 1975.

Many politicians praised Sehgal for his understanding of the sensitivity of the human soul politicians like Indira Gandhi, André Malraux, and U.S. President Jimmy Carter, who personally received Sehgal's work 'Rising Spirit' at the White House, Washington; which was gifted to him by Indian Prime Minister, Morarji Desai in the year 1978.

Sehgal had many successful shows around the globe in the early eighties, such as Naden Baden, Germany, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi, UAE, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, Solo Exhibition- Amar Nath Sehgal; Sculptures at Chaux de fond, Switzerland. "Crushing Burden" shows mother earth crushing under the overgrowing population, unveiled in the U.N. 2nd world population conference in Mexico in 1984, Sehgal was awarded U.N. Peace Medal for his work.

In 1986 Sehgal's work which was homage to political prisoners and respect to Nelson Mandela, *The Captive*, was unveiled at the UNESCO House, Paris, by United Nations Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar.

Sehgal had a successful show of Form and Music at the Cercle Munster, Luxembourg, in 1987, One can only hear and enjoy music, but Sehgal made it possible for the viewer to actually see and enjoy the music as well.

Sehgal showcased an important series of works, Folio of 11 Ganesha serigraphs. Ganesha is shown in different moods, the figure is not a kind of Ganesh we have seen, but an unconventional form of Ganesha can be seen in the Folio. The Folio's were displayed in 1991 in New York.

In 1993 Sehgal was awarded the Copper Plaque by the Lalit Kala Akademi. While another one-person show was displayed, Amar Nath Sehgal- Exhibition of Graphics and Sculpture, at Arpana Art Gallery. The Following Year *'The Captive'* was installed at the Palaris Wilson, the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights office in Geneva, Switzerland. In 2001 *'The Captive'* was installed at Robben Island, South Africa; it was a tribute to Nelson Mandela, as he was imprisoned there for twenty-seven years. The sculpture finally reached its rightful place, as it was made to honor Nelson Mandela and other Political Prisoners.

In 2004 Sehgal's exhibition *'Epic Episodes- Ramanyan and Mahabharata'* was inaugurated by President Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. At the IGNCA, New Delhi(India). One year later, another show *'Creative Perceptions'* was exhibited at the India International Center in 2005. Amar Nath took his final breath on 27th December 2007, and we lost a gem of Indian Art who not only touched the hearts of people who knew him but also of people who saw his work; Amar Nath was gone on that day; Sehgal still lives on and will keep living through his Art.

Partition and Amar Nath Sehgal:

Artist Amar Nath stated that My Nerves were Shattered and observed the holocaust, with millions killed and several more millions uprooted from their ancestral hearths and homes, on both sides of borders, to seek refuge, solace, security, and peacekeeping their bodies and soul together.(Sehgal, American Education : An Experience) The Turmoil of partition was so impactful on him that Sehgal could not be parted away from the pain and suffering of his world. Sehgal's sculptures reflect his unconscious, the horrors he witnessed, and the sleepless nights he has been through; all of these came back to clean his soul; as Picasso says, 'Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life'(Picasso, n.d.). The artworks created by Sehgal on commensurate to partition are truly moving. The name in itself describes the work, Anguish cries. The screaming faces express people's extreme pain and suffering through the partition. A coalescence of screaming faces all welded together shows the mass suffering, the recent and biggest tragedy in which millions suffered on both sides of the border. If Picasso's Guernica (1937) is to be seen, it was also made on the killing of thousands during the Spanish Civil War, after the bombing of the small city of Gaurnica. The gray and white used in the painting are similar to Sehgal's bronze, and the howling faces and screams are so strong that one can clearly understand what Sehgal witnessed.

"The Floating Cries of the Anguish and suffering in the abyss of life on the Nation are a constant reminder of a leaf or a page of history that he is one Eshwar Alatere Nam the two sides of the leaf are inseparable they are to be one and united".

In Fig.2, The screaming heads seem similar to the Anguish Cries; above the cries, there is a stone leaf on both sides; there are inscriptions in Devanagari and Urdu which say Eshwar Allah TereNaam. This sculpture pays homage to souls who lost their lifers and everything on both sides of the border; the two sides of a leaf are inseparable; they are to be united; they are one; they must remain as one; that is what the history is, says Amar Nath Sehgal. He has used his knowledge of engineering in this work, and this is not just a regular sculpture, but a water sculpture, situated in



Fig.1 -Anguished Cries - Bronze,1971,Sehgal Archives



Fig.2:Eshwar Allah TereNaam, Concrete mixed with stone, 1971,Sehgal Archives

between a small water pond right outside Sehgal's studio, which is now become Amar Nath Sehgal Private Collection, a museum dedicated to Sehgal and his journey in New Delhi's Jangpura Extension.

The Fig.3, A family of 3, father, mother, and son. Elongated raised hands are crying for help. The simple yet powerful work by Amar Nath Sehgal shows his skillful technique to display the pathos and helplessness that this family of 3 is suffering through. While standing in front of the work, one can feel the pain the artist is trying to show, crying, weeping, and a cadaverous family who are waiting for their screams and cries to be heard. They desperately raise their hands, hoping that someone will listen to them. The Anguish of the figures is portrayed through very evocative gestures and thoughtful expressions of what Sehgal experienced during the time of partition. The sculpture was much appreciated, and Sehgal was awarded the Gold Plaque (President's Award) in the National Exhibition of Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, in 1958.



Fig.3: Cries Unheard, bronze, 1958, Sehgal Archives

Tyranny of Colonialism, bronze, 1958. Sehgal's bold yet simple, primitive severity and expressive force, sculpture with a strong visual in it, stick-like figures, one kneeling in acceptance of his fate, rest three waiting for their turn to be kneeled by the ruler. This is in sight of oppression; four figures bounded with shackles of slavery, submission of oppressed people in front of a strong, ruthless ruler; this sculpture makes me feel the sensitivity of Sehgal as this is not only what Indians felt or were oppressed but for every country and its people who went through the same in the entire history of humankind.



Fig. 4: Tyranny of Colonialism, bronze, 1958 ,Sehgal Archives

In the Fig.5, 'Uprising' casted in bronze .The title of sculpted artwork itself tells a lot about the work, think elongated bodies seen as if they are rising from breaking the shackles of tyranny; this one can say is in true sense the contemporary of Giacometti, the outstretched hands are the sign of freedom, and the same joy or spirit of independence can be seen in the work clearly, the uniformed figures the gracious forms are in a minimalistic approach.



Shaken with fear, pen on paper 1973 with its mouth open to the extent of breaking its jaw, this screaming face shows the pain, Artist Sehgal is trying to portray through this artwork of Pen and paper. This (Fig.6) drawing reminds me of Picasso's The Weeping Woman, 1937, which was in response to the Spanish Civil War, and the bombing of Gaurnica. The debilitated figure of the woman suggests her poor state, weak shoulders, open mouth, and thin neck; all shows portray the horrors Sehgal witnessed during the partition; many died on the way, many due to starvation, and all were traumatized by the horrendous act.

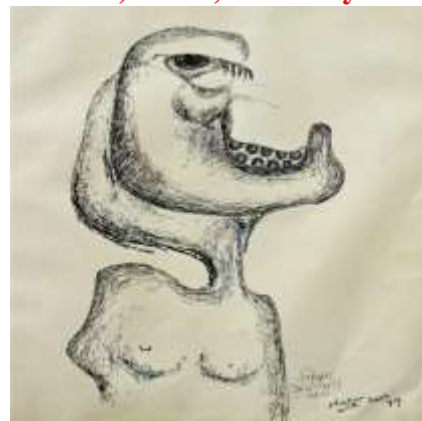


Fig.6: Shaken with fear, pen on paper 1973, Sehgal Archives

In Fig.7, Loose rhythmic brushstrokes create harmony in the head. Head with an open mouth shows the kind of Anguish in the emotions; the ink gives a smooth touch to the work as it seems to be very soft and with the flow, while the felt pen provides the hardness within the emotions Sehgal wanted to portray.



Fig. 7: Anguished Head, Felt pen and ink on paper, 1969, Sehgal Archives

The pen's hard spontaneous strokes compliment the drawing in terms of light and shade. The open mouth is a window to horror, fear, and anguish where the artist wants us to take us all.

In the Fig.8, bronze statue with green patina gives the sublime effect of a sunken ship underwater, like the screams have been submerged and long lost; everyone has forgotten them-the screaming voices with open mouths.

In most of his works, one can see the traumatizing horrors he has witnessed during partition, which like the ghost, never left his mind; the cubist and surrealist approach to the sculpture is seen in Sehgal's work. He seems to use symbolic elements to show the pathos and miseries of human.



Fig. 8: Voices, bronze, 1970, Sehgal Archives

Conclusion:

An artist is that part of society that is sensitive to nature and observes everything. An artist portrays the events which have affected him the most. This is what Amar Nath Sehgal did all his life; he was moved from the core of his heart when he had to leave his village, the place where he was born, a place where he grew, a place where he studied, a place where he used to play, suddenly one day with a thought that he would never see it ever again. On the way to free India, he witnessed the anguish, grief, pathos, suffering, and helplessness of thousands of people and people he cared for; that horrifying, heart-wrenching experience broke him. Sehgal became the voice of the voiceless; he became the eye of the blind and ears for the deaf; throughout his life, he worked for the society.

In his life, Sehgal explored various mediums but fell in love with bronze. in his extensive career his ambition in life remained pure and simple, to be creative, to bring forth his creative work as simply

as possible to humanity and bring humanism to the forth. Sehgal always said, the judgment always remained with the society, and how they feel about his work.

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- *Eshwar Allah Tere Naam*, Concrete mixed with stone, 1971, 90x110x82 inch, Amar Nath Sehgal private Collection, New Delhi.
- *Cries Unheard*, bronze, 1958, 23.75x68x23.75-inch, National gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
- *Tyranny of Colonialism*, bronze, 1958, 45x75x31 inch, National modern Art Gallery, New Delhi.
- *Uprising*, bronze, 1957, 27.5x28.75x12.36-inch, Private Collection, Sotheby's Inc. 2020)
- *Shaken with Fear*, pen on paper, 1973, 14.6x9.6 inch, Amar Nath Sehgal Private Collection.
- *Anguished head*, Felt pen on paper, 1969, 6.5x9 inch, Amar Nath Sehgal Private Collection.
- *Voices*, bronze, 1970, 17x7.2x8.5 inch, Amar Nath Sehgal Private Collection.

Image courtesy: Amar Nath Sehgal Private Collection, Sotheby's Inc.