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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
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Commemorating The 100th Birth Anniversary of Amrita Sher-Gil

Balassi Institute
Hungarian Information and Cultural Center
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Speech

by

H.E. Ms Katalin Bogyay
President of the General Conference

Dear Dr. Karan Singh,
President of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations

Dear Mr. Tibor Kovács,
Director of Hungarian Information and Cultural Centre

Dear Compatriots and my dear Indian Friends,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Amrita Sher-Gil, seventy years after her passing at a tender young age of twenty eight, remains a preeminent cultural ambassador between India and Hungary. Born from a Sikh aristocrat father and a Hungarian pianist mother, she spent her life in Hungary, Italy, France and India. Her path of seeking artistic creativity has bridged the two countries and two cultures together. Her paintings reveal her training in the Western schools of art, and at the same time, reflect colorfully her love for India and her response to the life of its people.

But of course, the mutual interest of the peoples of Hungary and India has a much longer history. Indo-Hungarian scholarly and cultural contacts go back to the 15th and 16th centuries.

Interestingly, the first Hungarian known to have visited India, Gyorgy Huszti, was not motivated by academic ambitions. He reached the western coast of the sub-continent in 1538 as a slave in the army of the Turkish sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent. The first verifiable cross-cultural influences date back to the 15th century when a Latin work by a Franciscan monk Pelbart Temesvari makes mention of an Indian mythology book called the Kilil which in all probability was a reference to the story of Kalila and Dimna in Panchatantra.

Famous Hungarian travelers, scholars and explorers have reached India as early as in the 18th century. These include János Honigberger, who had come from Transylvania as a court doctor of the famous Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and Alexander Csoma de Kőrös who made the ever first Tibetan-English dictionary in India.

Hungarians accord a special reverence to the great Indian poet Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. In 1913, the year he was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, his poems were translated by Mihaly Babits and published in the famous Hungarian literary journal Nyugat. In Hungary, it is a general knowledge that Gurudev visited and stayed at Balatonfured in 1926 for heart treatment at the world renowned cardiac hospital, and left a lasting impression in the minds of the people in Balatonfured. In order to immortalize his stay and out of their love and regard for him, they erected a statue and named after him a long waterfront promenade along the Balaton lake. Many important dignitaries from India, as well as other parts of the world visit Balatonfured to pay respect to Gurudev and, following the example set by him, plant saplings around the statue in the garden. I had a great honor to plant a tree along the Tagore promenade in September of last year, during the internationally renowned Salvatore Quasimodo Poetry Competition and Prize Award Ceremony.

Amrita Sher-Gil represents a brightest artistic and cultural link between the two countries. The works she produced during her short but prolific life combine brilliant details from the scenes of everyday life in India, and create a timeless monumentality. One painting that often comes to my mind is the *Haldi Grinders*, depicting a group of women engaged in a mundane activity – crushing turmeric. Their view is obscured by trees, their bodies reduced to a clutch of hands gripping the crushing wheel. A viewer has the feeling of spying on them from behind the trees, to unveil a deep secret held in an ancient ritual. In a tragically brief career, Sher-Gil did much to introduce her country to the idea of the free-spirited artist, and to show her people that art could interpret Indian life for Indians. As one contemporary art historian has put it: "She introduced the modern into India."

I would like to thank the Hungarian Information and Cultural Center in New Delhi for putting together this wonderful exhibition, highlighting the Magyar Connection of Amrita Sher-Gil. This event is another testament to the power of cultural diplomacy to build bridges between peoples and nations. Cultural Diplomacy is at the heart of UNESCO's mandate, and as the President of the General Conference of UNESCO, it is a great pleasure for me to see such cultural ties being fostered by my native country. This should serve as an example for other countries on how to use the soft power to build lasting peace, based on inter-cultural dialogue and appreciation. It is my great wish to see such cooperation between other countries, poor and rich, from the north of south, representing the diversity of our human cultures and traditions.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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