Chapter 3
Amrita had her first experience of India as an eight year old child which lasted for three short years but after a six-month schooling in Italy she returned for a five year long span (1924-1929) before going for a five year stay in Europe, particularly Paris (1929-1934) and on her return she wrote: "As soon as I put my foot on Indian soil, not only in subject, spirit, but also in technical expression, my painting underwent a great change, becoming more fundamentally Indian" and went on to add: "I realised my real artistic mission then: to interpret the life of Indians and particularly the poor Indians pictorially; to paint those silent images of infinite submission and patience; to depict their angular brown bodies, strangely beautiful in their ugliness; to reproduce on canvas the impression their sad eyes created on me; to interpret them with a new technique, my own technique, that transfers what might otherwise appeal on a plane that is emotionally cheap, to the plane which transcends it and yet conveys something to the spectator who is

aesthetically sensitive enough to receive the sensation."

She also 'came India via west', not 'as an alien critic' but with a burning desire so that her artistic personality could find its true atmosphere in the colour and light of east; but was shocked to find that far from the voluptuous, colourful, sunny and superficial India she had expected it was a "desolate, yet strangely beautiful, it had endless tracks of luminous yellow-grey land, it offered dark-bodied, sad-faced, incredibly thin men and women who would 'move silently looking almost like silhouettes' an India over which an 'indefinable meloncholy' reigned.

During 1935 when Amrita came back, India was going through severe depression. The country was being ruled by the British who had rejected the Indian tradition and culture to follow their imperialistic doctrine that if you want to rule over a country first destroy its culture. They would harass Indian people and force them to follow western culture. The dirty politics of Britishers lead to a vulgar distribution of wealth, islands of affluence in a sea of poverty, which made Indian people to lose their self confidence to became handicapped and

insecure. This vulgar distribution of wealth strengthened only the higher classes who accepted all the dirty policies of Britishers for their own profits while others, particularly the labour class and farmers suffered a lot. The stagnation in agriculture in the beginning of 20th century led to the weakness and decay of Indian society. So that thoughtful Indians began to look (think) for the defects of their society and for ways and means of removing them. Amrita was also among those great personalities who saw and felt pain of her own society. She saw poverty, famines and the ruining of Indian culture and resolved to paint it all on her canvas.

It is known that art is a mirror of an artist's own society and his brush and colours are instruments through which an artist can attempt to remove all evils from his society. It is by this instrument that Amrita vigorously opposed evils: she carried on a persistent struggle against the religious and social evils which were widely prevalent in the country, particularly imperialism, unemployment, superstitions, child marriages, etc.

For example 'Man with Lemon' and 'Banana seller' show dissatisfaction of earning. Perhaps two lemons are symbol of less income and a single bunch of Banana reveals the vulgar distribution of wealth. Another canvas 'Child Wife' is an appeal
to social leaders a question in itself to the then status of Indian women and their suffering; it is reminding us of the painful condition of women in the era before India became Independent.

Amrita had come back to India with a mission: to declare that she is not anything else but Indian; that her soul and spirit was purely Indian. She turned her eyes from the academies of France to the land of numberless villagers and hills, of wide stretching meadows and fields of corn, of the poor, contended folk of the countryside with their melancholy face, and it was here that she found inspiration for her art. Her work became strongly individual and very original and with her resolve it was able to receive appreciation (notice) from a multitude of people in India and outside: Amrita could establish herself as a one person phenomenon. She studied the status of the prevalent contemporary Indian art which mainly concentrated on depicting the pleasant aspects of Indian life which to her appeared sort of lifeless and she reacted by revealing the other side.

She was a rebel who revealed both sides of India, the dynamic and passive, but in the thirties her message could not easily be understood. It is natural that her accidental half
conscious of time, found satisfaction in spontaneous outburst of excitement. In conversation, she was emotional, critical, aggressive, but in her painting, wholly, almost motionless, conscious that she had to paint and to go on painting.³

As an artist, Amrita felt that her arrival in India signified an almost revolutionary change. She rejected the trend to paint pictures that tell stories outrightly. The significance of her paintings lay in "the abstract yet vital plane of line, colour, form and design."⁴ With in two months of her arrival in India, while in Amritsar, she finished painting a picture entitled 'Group of Three Girls', a painting which clearly indicated that her approach to painting had already acquired a new dimension.

The 'Group of Three Girls' later won the Bombay Art Society's first prize and Gold medal for the best work, in the Society's exhibition in January 1937. Writing about this picture, one of Bombay's newspaper art critics said: "it is a striking yet restful study in modernist style of 'Three Indian Girls' in thoughtful pose the clear lines and simple but effective colour hold the attention....."

3. Appasamy Jaya, Baldoon Dhingra: Sher-Gil, Contemporary Series of Indian Arts, Lalit Kala Akademi. New Delhi, 1965, p. 4

Another picture that Amrita painted during her stay in Amritsar as was Girl in Blue: between the time of her arrival and the month of September, she painted two pictures namely, 'Beggar Women' and 'Portrait of Father'; which were among those that she sent to the Sixty-Third annual exhibition of the Simla Fine Arts society. The annual exhibition of the Simla Fine Arts society was perhaps among the best known art exhibitions held in India and every artist worth his salt exhibited his work. There Amrita, sent some of her paintings - ten in all. Five were accepted. One of her paintings - Conversation Piece was awarded His Highness the Raja of Faridkot Prize for a portrait or figure study.  

She saw the starving faces, the hopeless resignation in the eyes of the masses, trodden down alike by man and fate. The dumb voice of the millions of Indians found an echo in her heart. Amrita herself regarded her pictures in her newer style better that her former work which followed the trend of the more academic western schools. In her work in India her powerful and individual talent found its climate. Her paintings are considered as an unique gift in Indian art history which gives inspiration even to the present day younger generation.

The character of Indian people that we see in her paintings is not found in the paintings of other Indian artists.

Her contribution to Indian painting will be ever remembered. In 1935 Amrita painted eleven pictures - two of them portraits. She was completely successful in the interpretation of Indian people through her paintings, 'Child Wife' being one of her best pictures. The subject sits in the familiar Indian pose, one knee up the other leg lying sideways, sharply bent at the knee. By elongating the limbs so that the raised knee is almost at the shoulder level, the artist gives the impression of child's thinness, further accentuated by the straightness of the startlingly white blouse. The face of the child appears inexpressibly sad. The large eyes look out from under the straight long hair. The title explains the sadness. The thick lips, strongly highlighted, express an almost sulky resentment not generally found among older women in India, accustomed as they are to have their fate decided for them by others.⁶

In her major works like 'Hill Men' and 'Hill Women' she took local folk for models. She again represented the experiment

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in 'The Bride's Toilet', 'The Brahmacharies' and 'South Indian Villager Going to the Market'. Her 'Beggar Woman' is the best example of Indian village culture.

'Banana Seller' is yet another remarkable work which she did during her stay in India. It is a nearly exact representation of those Indian people who are living their life under poverty line, their tanned skin, sad big black eyes and lost dreamy looks are telling the stories of their suffering. In this painting Amrita has shown three figures only with a single bunch of Bananas which is clearly showing the economic conditions of Indian villagers. They lost their hope but still there is some hope in the eyes of woman and girl who is having a flower. May be this flower has been shown in symbolic way; the eyes of the girl show that somebody may come and buy the bunch of Bananas. All these things reveal the sensitivity of the artist towards the suffering class.

Amrita was attracted to the unpolluted and indigenous, original folk traditions and could capture a few folk elements such as modelling, colours, etc. in her paintings, in line with several other important contemporary artists like Abnindranath Tagore, Nandlal Bose and Jamini Roy. But she was mainly impressed by Jamini Roy who has painted in folk style. The
basic characteristic of folk art is that its forms are simple, bold and clear. Their strong living shapes and bright colours contribute to a vigour and animation not to be found in more complex art. The history and characteristic features of folk art will be seen to have played a singularly important role. Its origin go back to the primitive society.

Bihar and Bengal are important centres of living folk art. Folk art is a continuous tradition which is handed down from generation to generation by their ancestors. Of any particular culture it is practiced among the rural areas and no moderation or changes are done in any case. The material or colour used in this particular art expression is taken from nature or prepared from chalk, geru, stone, flowers, plants, etc. which are local substances.

The themes of these art expressions are religious motifs, symbols, patterns, finger prints and often related to witch craft used for removal of fear healing and seeking well being etc.

In folk art figures are generally painted in tempura, in flat colours enclosed by strong brush lines. There may be some surface decoration or indication of landscape but in most cases the paper itself functions as a background and scenery is left to the imagination of the spectator. Figures are usually finished
with bold brush strokes. The finishing is generally restricted to
details such as jewellery, folds of the drapery, the facial
features, hands and feet. There is no colour gradation but for a
red line accompanying the black line forming a transitional
modelling line.

One notices in the toys especially the strong frontality,
characteristic of primitive art, the figure faces the spectator
while the back is often ignored. Also the head is comparatively
large and special attention is paid to the eyes which are large
and strong. In India folk art was discovered in Bengal and
began to be collected by the Tagores, Ajit Ghosh and other
artists and connoisseurs of art in the 20th century.\footnote{Lalit Kala Contemporary Indian Painting, Series No. 34, January 1987, p. 20.}

The largest group of rural painters consists of the 'Patuas'
of Bengal and closely related to them, the jadupatua of Bihar.
In present day the word 'Patua' denotes a painter of picture
scrolls. Developments in the later folk art of Bengal gave rise
to a new and very interesting phenomenon, in that the 'Patuas'
were also compelled to adopt to urban requirements. In the
early twentieth century 'Pat' paintings of Kalighat school were
executed in the simplest possible manner, using a few brilliant

\footnote{Lalit Kala Contemporary Indian Painting, Series No. 34, January 1987, p. 20.}
colours, crudely outlined, and including only a minimum number of detail. 8

When Amrita came in India she realised that folk style of painting is tradition of the land. It represents originality of Indian culture and artistic development. Amrita took folk art with a gesture of tribute to Indian traditional art.

For fulfilment of her mission she captured few folk elements in her paintings, such as modelling, colours, large head and bold brush strokes. In general she had a strong influence of Indian folk style of in her paintings. Her paintings also derived from the frescoes of Ellora, Ajanta and Mattancheri.

In her paintings figures are generally painted in very simplified manner, less complicated, much bolder gives pupil like effect which clearly resembles with that of folk style of modelling.

Earth colours and Flat colours are usually used in her painting which is a distinct quality of folk art. In some of her painting such as 'Banana Seller', 'Red Clay Elephant', 'Camel' and in 'Elephant Bathing' she goes for rich colours. In all her paintings folk elements are clearly visible.

It seems that in Amrita's painting figures are always finished with bold brush strokes. Sometimes lines are also visible. The richness of her technique apart the uniqueness of her, style apart, the choice of her purposeful themes apart, her sensitivity apart, Amrita should have lived beyond the years she was destined to live to see through the celebrated declaration of her beloved India's independence in the shadow of the horrors of partition.