



André Malraux : Rediscovering India through Nehru

KEYWORDS

Dr. Jyothi Venkatesh

Asst. Professor in French, Dept. of Foreign Languages, Bangalore University, P.K. Block, Palace Road, Bangalore-560009

ABSTRACT *André Malraux, an eminent French novelist, art theorist and a Statesman discovered India through Graeco-Buddhist art. A discovery, which became a passion and found its true meaning through discussions with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, and called India world's Holy Grail.*

A well-known French novelist, an art theorist, Minister for Information and later Minister for Cultural Affairs under de Gaulle's Presidency, André Malraux was fascinated by the Graeco-Buddhist art, which he discovered at a young age, while visiting the Musée Guimet, in France. For him, this art form was unique as it was a blend of both oriental and occidental cultures.

Malraux's fascination would have perhaps ended just like that, but for the fact that, when his father, Fernand-George Malraux, committed suicide in 1930, due to the stockmarket crash and onset of the great depression, he was holding a book on Buddhist thought about afterlife. His father believed that in places like Kabul and Koniach one could talk to Gods...

Malraux took upon himself the task of visiting Afghanistan and seeing for himself what his father believed in. During this time, he also undertook journey to India, the land of the Buddha. He came as a mourner who was on a pilgrimage. Thus, started his tryst with India. His life was this incessant journey between East and West.

Though, India does not figure much in Malraux's life, she is present in a rich, dense and copious way in his works of art and more explicitly in his book 'Anti-Mémoires', published in 1967.

He also owes to India his long friendship with Raja Rao, an Indian writer of English Language novels and short stories, whose works are deeply rooted in Hinduism. Through him, he also got to meet, the one with the air of the Grand Moghol, a smile of a poet, a sensitive and simple man: Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

First meeting: From one intellect to another

Malraux and Nehru met for the first time, in Paris in 1936, where Nehru was on a private visit. Raja Rao arranged a meeting at a Chinese restaurant. It was a meeting between an art enthusiast and a freedom fighter; a meeting between two distinct countries, two civilizations, two cultures, two poles. Two opposites who got attracted to each other.

Malraux, immaculately dressed in black suit and stuffed waist coat, with his sparse black hair, a square face and round darting eyes, stood waiting in full elegance and height, outside the restaurant.

When Nehru got off the taxi, he was quiet, self-turned, face dipping into his chest, withdrawn, with almost a lisp as he spoke, as if he spoke to himself. When Malraux spoke to him, he shot his words left, right and centre, like artillery. Nehru must have wondered what sort of man was he? Supremely

arrogant, but shy with an innocent student smile.

Nehru knew some French and Malraux knew some English. Raja Rao became the interpreter between them, a task which he did not find easy.

The interaction between the two was an eye-opener for both. Malraux, who had studied Sanskrit as a student, was very interested to clarify some of his doubts and satisfy his curiosity from topics ranging from Buddhism to non-violence. Nehru, surprised at times at the type of questions, answered in his gentle way.

First question Malraux asked him was: "What according to you is the reason the Buddhism was lost to India, after giving it to the world?" Nehru did not have a reply then, thought and later replied that India had made Buddha into a God like others, and this led to the disappearance of Buddhism from India.

Then Malraux raised the question of Metempsychosis and non-violence. Nehru never expected such a question. Then the conversation veered towards the meaning of truth.

Malraux made a convincing picture to show how eternal India, who was now going to come out as an emerging new country, from the shackles of British rule, was more stable and prepared to face the future, whereas Europe was still groping in dark.

According to Malraux, Europe was destructive to a point of being suicidal. It was a cemetery of ideas – where one could not go beyond the good and the evil. He believed the Europeans could never go beyond duality, like Indians. He believed that due to saints like Shankaracharya, India had surged way ahead in realizing the truth. Whereas, it took Nietzsche almost two thousand years to realize that 'Truth' is beyond good and evil. Thus, for Malraux, Europe was a cemetery. When Europe was groping in dark, India had grown into a civilization. She had Upanishads, the Gita and Lord Krishna, who was advising Arjuna to kill and be killed, as neither actually existed. It was all Maya. Whereas, in Europe, everything was sin.

Conversation then turned to non-violence. Nehru commented that Lord Krishna had also tried to prevent the great war between Kauravas and Pandavas. He wanted the Kauravas to agree to part with a part of the kingdom, as they were the rightful heirs.

Malraux interjected: 'Would Gandhi say this to the British?'

to which Nehru replied: "The adversity of the enemy should

never be your opportunity.”

Malraux believed that the basic difference between Europe and India was the fact that India believed in eternity. When whole of eternity is before oneself, then good will be good. There will be no question of evil. It was time that created duality and that is what Europeans did not have. Indians mocked death, as soul was eternal and the body was just a mask. Europeans wore masks to carnival and at the end of the carnival was crucifixion. At the end, in India the mask was destroyed by fire, whereas in Europe, the mask was put in wood and cement and placed in the cemetery called Europe.

Malraux loved India, because she believed in destiny. For him the Bhagavat Gita was a revolutionary book. He liked the fact that man had to achieve his destiny. Having read the Mahabharata, he believed that Bhishma was indeed great. Not only did he fight against the Pandavas, but after his fall, asked Arjuna to give him some water on his deathbed of arrows.

For Malraux that was India. A land without enemies and adversaries. Where a man like Gandhiji was also following his Dharma and so were all the other Indians.

Whereas for Europe, where fight meant, fight with guns. In India, said Nehru, Gandhiji was also fighting, but not with guns, but with heart, as he believed that evil is misunderstood good. Nehru added that Gandhiji was a saintly man, but was also king-like – He dressed like a peasant, but walked erect like an emperor. He was a saint-king, and both roles are bound by Dharma.

Finally, Malraux said that the greatness of India lay in the fact that she could turn defeat into victory. He then added: “Mr. Nehru, India does not belong to you – she belongs to me, he said, beating his chest, a *moi*, India is world’s Holy Grail”.

Panditji was moved by these words. He felt Malraux was like his younger brother- Europe, after all was younger than India.

At the door of the restaurant, before Malraux left, he said: “I will visit you, when India is free. Remember me. Keep India away from duality, because duality and death are the only two enemies of man”.

Second meeting: Between a Statesman and a Prime Minister

When Malraux met Nehru the next time, it was in independent India. He as Minister for Cultural Affairs met Nehru, Prime Minister of India. This was an official visit, where he had come to convey President de Gaulle’s wishes to the new nation. The year was 1958.

After the official formalities, Malraux veered back to their first meeting in Paris in the year 1936. Nehru spoke of a new independent India, where struggle existed, but on a different level. Malraux believed that the struggle would be temporary, as the legacy of India, under the inspiration of Gandhiji and the endeavours of Nehru, was so strong, that the new India would be able to base its policy on moral concept.

At the same time, he also felt that India had lot of offer to the West by way of her rich cultural heritage and civilization. In

this regard, he proposed an Exhibition of Indian art, in Paris. Ranging from Indian sculpture, painting and music, to presentation of Hindu philosophy and ethics by qualified masters, professors or spiritual leaders. This, he believed, would reveal to the West the spirit, the very Soul of India. For Nehru, the idea of exhibiting the totality of India’s values was very attractive, and he gave immediate consent.

In order to accede to the spiritual dimension, Malraux wanted to know which places in India he should visit and whom he should meet. Nehru, busy with India’s immediate needs, could not give him an immediate reply. To this Malraux remarked: “Finding solution for problems with their immediate significance, for one in charge of India’s destiny, did not imply the exclusion of spiritual values”. The Prime Minister agreed, but added: “The destitute masses, deprived of their basic needs, would hardly listen to him if he just preached resignation.” He further added that he was looking at an India, where there would be an integration of abiding values into the new order.

Conversation between Malraux and Nehru could go on forever. They decided to meet again after Malraux’s trip to south of India, as suggested by Nehru.

Visit to the south was an experience totally different from that at North. He visited Madras, witnessed Indian classical music and dance. In the Temple of Madurai, he found a bigger centre of Hinduism than in the North. On the way back, he visited Ajanta, Ellora, Elephanta and Bombay. It was a 36 hrs excursion. The rest was spent at PM’s residence in an atmosphere of intimacy that prevails among friends.

When Nehru asked him: “What have you seen in India?”

Malraux replied: “Ajanta, Madurai and Nehru”.

In Nehru, Malraux saw the face of an eternal India merged with the face of a new independent India. For him, Nehru was India!

In his farewell message to India, Malraux wrote:

“This ancient land of spirituality is also a young country full of hope, which only regained its independence in the name of Justice, which only seeks to vanquish her pain and poverty and recapture her greatness.

India is also a land of great dreams. The image of Mahatma Gandhi, visible everywhere in this country: what is it if not proof of what sheer patience can create when placed in the service of a great dream? And one day, perhaps, history will recognize with wonderment, in Jawaharlal Nehru and in some of the others who have undertaken one of the most onerous tasks of our times, the sages who follow a saint.

As I leave India, I wish for her people and for their chosen guides, all the good fortune that a man can wish for. For in the organization of fraternity, one of the major undertakings of our civilization, India’s fate will be the world’s opportunity.”

In 1974, André Malraux was presented the Jawaharlal Nehru award for International Understanding.

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