

Nicholas Roerich: A Journey Towards Universal Harmony

Shraddha Pal

Assistant Professor, Department of Slavonic and Finno - Ugrian Studies, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

Email: [spal\[at\]sfus.du.ac.in](mailto:spal[at]sfus.du.ac.in)

Abstract: *Nicholas Roerich, a visionary mystic painter left a rich legacy of more than 7000 paintings, sketches, and at least 30 books, which opened the door to his spiritual quest. The spiritual journey of Nicholas Roerich started with his fascination with unconventional spirituality such as esoteric and occultism. This shift from conventional orthodoxy was due to the quest of modernist poets and artists, especially of symbolists of the Silver Age, who were seeking the intangible, abstract, immaterial essence of life. This quest for unconventional spirituality gained popularity in the Artists' Colony in Talashkino founded by Princess Maria Kalvdievna Tenisheva in the 1890s. Nicholas Roerich collaborated with the princess in this ambitious revivalist project. Aleksandra Loginovna Pogoskaia, a collaborator with Princess Maria Tenisheva in her project of reviving the pagan, peasant arts turned to theosophy in 1909. Nicholas Roerich also developed an interest in theosophy and Eastern mysticism. Roerich along with his wife and two children embarked on a five - year - long trek through the Himalayas in search of "universal mysticism". This paper is an attempt to unravel the spiritual quest of Nicholas Roerich which is secular and propagates peace through a "beautiful synthesis" of cultures, and religions of the world.*

Keywords: Nicholas Roerich, mystic, painter, theosophy and eastern mysticism, spiritual quest, Helena Roerich

Nicholas Roerich, a visionary mystic painter left a rich legacy of more than 7000 paintings, sketches and at least 30 books, which opened the door to his spiritual quest. The spiritual journey of Nicholas Roerich started his fascination with unconventional spirituality which was very different from orthodoxy; such as esoteric and occultism. This shift from conventional orthodoxy was due to the quest of modernist poets and artists, especially symbolists of the Silver Age, who were seeking the intangible, abstract, immaterial essence of life.

Towards the end of the 19th century, many avant - garde groups and alliances were developing especially in St. Petersburg. The art magazine "The World of Art" founded by Princess Maria Tenisheva and Sergei Diaghilev, played a significant role and influence in Russian art and literature. Through this magazine, the avant - garde modernist artistic and literary movements were introduced to Russian artistic circles. Roerich was on the editorial board of this magazine. We can say that, from here Roerich's career as a symbolist painter started.

The quest for unconventional spirituality of symbolists gained popularity in the Artists' Colony in Talashkino founded by Princess Maria Tenisheva in the 1890s. Nicholas Roerich collaborated with Princess in her project of reviving the pagan, peasant arts, ancient archaeological places etc. Aleksandra Loginovna Pogoskaia, who was also a collaborator with Princess Maria Tenisheva in her project, turned to theosophy in 1909.

During this period theosophy was gaining popularity not only in Russia but in the West too. Nicholas Roerich's wife Helena Roerich translated Mme Blavatsky's book "Secret Doctrine" into Russian. Helena Roerich was very much influenced by the life and philosophy of Mme Blavatsky. Nicholas Roerich also developed an interest in theosophy and Eastern mysticism. Roerich along with his wife and two children embarked on a five - year trek through the

Himalayas in search of the land of universal mysticism Shambhala.

Mme Blavatsky mentioned the legend of Shambhala in her book "Secret Doctrine", and we can say that this was the first time Russians were introduced to this legend. Mme Blavatsky explored the legend of Shambhala during her travels through India and Tibet.

In her book "Secret Doctrine" HPB wrote about the evolution of human races. According to her, there are five "root races" and each race lived in 4 different mythological continents namely; Hyperborea, Lemuria, Atlantis and Shambhala. The first race does not have a physical form hence the first continent is unknown. Atlanteans fled their homeland Atlantis when it sunk into the ocean and reached Shambhala. Atlanteans and Shambhala races lived together in Shambhala hence they shared their culture and wisdom. Later they spread out across the world and were known as Aryans. At present, this theory is strongly criticized by the scholars. Most of the scholars have completely rejected it. However, at that time this theory was accepted by many and widely explored by the theosophists.

Roerichs believed in HPB's theory of Shambhala. He travelled through the most remote and dangerous parts of the Himalayas and central Asia and crossed more than 25 Himalayan passes in search of the mythic land of Shambhala which was believed to be situated somewhere in the Gobi Desert. Roerich believed that Shambhala is situated somewhere "behind the white mountains" and that "the bells of the abode are ringing".

During this journey, Roerich painted some of his most iconic paintings. He recorded his journey in his travel diaries "Altai - Himalaya", "Heart of Asia" and others. Roerich recorded the myths, legends, and parables which he discovered during his travels. In his writings, Roerich constantly tried to point out similarities between legends he heard, and imagery he saw in different cultures and places. For example in his

Volume 13 Issue 3, March 2024

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

www.ijsr.net

travel diary "Heart of Asia," Roerich makes note of the similarity between imagery he saw on the rocks in the Ladakh region and craving of Siberia, China and Scandinavia. He notes that -

*"The character of these carvings merits careful attention, because one may find similar designs on the rocks near the oasis Sanju in Sinkiang, in Siberia, in the Trans - Himalayas, and one remembers them in the Halristingar of Scandinavia"*¹

Roerich was fascinated with the religious and folkloric myths and legends of the mountains he travelled through. Roerich was very much fascinated with the myth of the white horse. This white horse appears many times in his work. In his writings, he notes that this white horse myth appears across all cultures in legends and folklore. In his work "Himawat" he writes about the omnipresence of this myth of the white horse in folklore of Europe, Russia, the Middle East and Central Asia.

"In folklore and sagas, we meet with the white steeds of heroes. We know of the white steed of St. George. We know of the white horses of St. Flora and St. Laurus. We have also met with the white fiery Pegasus.

We have seen the white horses of the Lithuanian ancient god Svetovit. And the Germanic Valkyries also rode on white steeds.

We have heard of the white horse of Isphagan in ancient Iran. We have seen the huge steeds of Arjuna, the guardians of the Temple.

*We have heard of the steed of Ghessar Khan, the great hero of ancient Asia, and we have seen the trails of its hooves on the rocks in Tibet. We knew of the steeds from Himavat, with the blessed treasure Chintamani."*²

Roerich believed in the preservation of the folklore, arts and cultures of the world, as they represent the "sacred unity" and "oneness" of the world. He reiterates this in all his writings that folklore and arts have the power to unite people of the world. He constantly tried to find out common myths, and legends in different religions too. For example, when he talks about Chintamani in Buddhism, he tries to establish the fact that this miraculous stone belongs to not only Buddhists but to Hindus and Japanese too.

In his painting "Treasure of the World" (1924) the Tibetan legend of Erdeni Mori, the "jewel - bearing horse," is depicted. As per legend, this horse descends from the high mountains with a jewel on his saddle. This jewel is the Chintamani. It is believed that this miraculous stone will save the world at the appointed hour. In his writings Roerich notes that he saw a craving related to this legend in the Ladakh region and this legend may be found in Hindu and Buddhist traditions and also in Japanese arts. In his travel

diary Altai Himalaya, in chapter "India" he writes in detail about the Chintamani.

In his diaries, he made notes of all the legends and stories he heard from the sadhus, rishis and lamas he met while travelling through India and Tibet. In his travel diaries, he constantly writes about the similarities between these legends and stories. He saw "oneness" in all the variations of craving, legends and mythical stories. He writes about the advent of future Buddha "Maitreya", the kaliyuga avatar of Vishnu "Kalki" and the second coming of Jesus. He sees a lot of similarities between these beliefs and he sees it as a cross - fertilization of similar ideas.

Roerich believed in cross - cultural synthesis. He tried to find similarities among different cultures, religions, and belief systems. He attempted to bring together and enable cross - fertilization of ideas, and belief systems. His belief in this idea pervades through all his writings, paintings and other fields of knowledge he explored.

Roerich constantly searched for the similarities between different religious symbols. In his travel diary "Altai - Himalaya" he notes similarities between the symbols of Hindu Trimurti and Trinity in Christianity and similar symbols from other religions. He writes:

*"Are the symbols of the Hindu Trimurti alien to the Trinity? Does the Buddhist Tree of Wishes, hung with the objects of all desires, not respond to our conception of the Christmas Tree? What of the details of the arrangement of the temple altars? What of the ascetics and hermits, who buried themselves in their stone coffins? What of the image - lamps and the fires of conjurations; the wreaths and candles of heartfelt prayer, flung upon the bosom of the Ganges? And the birch of Trinity, the musk and incense? And the wrought gem - bedecked vestments? And the stones, thrown at Buddha by his close relative, are they not the same as the stones hurled at Stephen? Verily, not by accident have Buddhist legends been carved upon the frescoes of the Campo Santo in Pisa. Profound in its significance too is the Moslem legend telling of the visitation of the mother of Jesus to the mother of Mohammed before the birth of the Prophet. And Ladakian castles are towering, in the very same flight, as the eagles' nests of Faienza or Montefalcone."*³

Roerich was moved by the destruction and death because of the war. Roerich painted "The Dead City" in 1918. In this painting, a red serpent is surrounding the city and strangling it. The serpent is a symbol of ignorance, of materialism, of war, of violence. He used dark colours in this painting. We hardly ever find uses for such colours in his paintings. This painting is bleak and presents a grim picture of the war - torn world. Roerich was a pacifist. He believed in peace and harmony. After the world war, I Roerich was disturbed by the violence. He witnessed the destruction and deaths in the wake of war. Roerich believed in the beauty of art and culture. He believed that only the unity of arts and culture can bring peace to the world.

¹ <http://www.roerich.org/roerich-writings-heart-of-asia.php> accessed on 25.10.2020

² <http://www.roerich.org/roerich-writings-himavat.php> accessed on 25.10.2020

³ <http://www.roerich.org/roerich-writings-altai-himalaya.php> accessed on 26.10.2020

Through his paintings and writings, he tried to harmonize, and bring together different cultures, and religions and establish correspondence between conflicting ideas. He tried to show the world “the beautiful unity” that exists between different cultures and religions. He believed that the ignorance of the same is restricting humans from living in harmony. Roerich tried to unravel the “universal symphony” of the world through his art and writings. His thoughts and observations about various cultures, religions and people of various countries are still relevant. Today’s world needs him more than ever because he talked about the beauty that exists in folklore, arts, and cultures of the world, which are different yet very similar. They represent a “beautiful unity” which needs to be preserved and propagated. As Dostoevsky has said “Beauty will save the world” and Roerich believed in that and I am sure we all believe in that too.

References

- [1] <http://www.roerich.org/>
- [2] <https://studybuddhism.com/>
- [3] http://ngmaindia.gov.in/ce_nicholas-roerich.asp
- [4] <https://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/art/Legacy-of-the-mountain-man/article16576639.ece>
- [5] <https://frontline.thehindu.com/arts-and-culture/art/article30185451.ece>
- [6] <http://irmtkullu.com/>
- [7] <http://www.themontrealreview.com/2009/Exile-and-Utopia-Nicholas-Roerich-Shortcut-to-Promised-Land.php>