

I'm very attached to Indian culture and study Hindi books in Paris

The legendary, Paris-based **Syed Haider Raza** belongs to that elite club of artists, comprising FN Souza, MF Husain, KH Ara, HA Gade, Sadanand K Bakre, Akbar Padamsee and Krishen Khanna, who were the core architects of the pathbreaking Progressive Artists' Group. Many in this prize clutch of artists also spearheaded the recent art boom and touched dizzy price levels never before seen in Indian art globally or on the domestic front. Raza, himself, scaled a record \$2.5 million for his painting, *La Terre*, in London in June 2008. Raza visited Kolkata after decades for a show at the city's Akar Prakar Gallery, when Ashoke Nag caught up with him for a tête-à-tête. Excerpts:

A I enter the room where I am scheduled to meet Raza, I learn that he's engrossed, painting. I wait in the ante-room to meet the master artist. In the next 20-25 minutes, Raza enters the room in a light grey suit, white shirt and tie and Prada moccasins. The 88-year-old artist is naturally feeble, but is extremely alive, intellectually.

I learnt you were immersed in painting a short while before I met you.....

If something interesting crosses my mind, I take to colours even when I'm travelling. I try and create something at the slightest possibility. I'm passionate about painting. Drawings and paintings do not speak. They are a silent interlude. Music and dance are different, in that sense. But, you watch a painting in silence. France, where I have lived for six decades, is the land of (the philosopher) Descartes who is very important to me.

India must have been enveloped in great fervour after Independence when you and some other master Modernist masters of today joined hands to cobble together the Progressive group?

The Progressive Artists' Group was born out of an intense passion within us to create paintings independently without being influenced by what we learnt at school. Which meant the realism of western art. For us, it was a perception of *antar gyam* (inner knowledge). For them, it was largely what you saw with the eyes. We staged our first exhibition in Bombay in 1948. It was opened by Dr Mulk Raj Anand. Each of us was working in our own direction. And, we would meet sometimes to share thoughts. Things were getting internalised. Then, Souza left for London, while I chose to go to France.

You were born in Nagpur and did your initial studies there and then moved to study art in Bombay at the JJ School of Art. And, left for France after that....

Yes, that's right. I come from a very modest family background and lived initially in Nagpur. We spoke Urdu at home, but my teachers in school were all Brahmins who spoke Hindi. Thus, I learnt to speak Hindi. In time, I moved to Bombay and took admission in the JJ School of Art. During my stay in Bombay, I began learning French. So, when this French art scholarship was announced, I applied for it and was called for an interview. There were 50-60 interviewees, but I was only applicant one who could speak French. As a result, instead

of a one-year scholarship, I was offered a two-year one. I left for France in 1950.

But, you continued living there.....

Actually, although it was a difficult period, because of limited resources, the scholarship covered some of my expenses including my studies and, to a large extent, the room rent I was paying. In that sense, the French government was very generous. During my stint at Ecole (Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts), I was feverishly frequenting exhibitions and museums. I had time to come face to face with the paintings of Van Gogh, Gauguin, Soutine, Cezanne and others and understand the work that they did in France. Besides, I made a lot of foreigner friends. It was a very enriching experience.

What did you do after your studies at Ecole?

I stayed on for 5-6 years and worked very hard in my apartment studio to churn out paintings. These were displayed at the Gallery Lara Vinci in Paris. Eighteen French art critics came to cover the show and were so impressed that they awarded me the Prix de la Critique. Next week, all the major French newspapers like *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, *Information* and others. I happened to be the first foreigner to get the award. This was in 1956. I realised then that quality was the most important facet in any work. I also sold some works and rented another apartment on Rue Chaplat and started working silently in my studio. In step, I started showing my works in other galleries and venues like the Venice Biennale.

But, it still must have been difficult financially?

True. But, I continued living there. Meanwhile, in 1960, I married French artist Janine Mongillat. She was the only daughter in her family and asked me to stay on in Paris.

But, I must tell you that I am still an Indian citizen and retain my Indian passport. I'm very attached to Indian culture and study Hindi books in Paris. Currently, I'm reading the *Bhagavad Gita* interpreted by Vinoba Bhave and attempting to understand it again. It's important that one remembers his or her roots. Your art must reflect the culture that you belong to. Art can't be just a piece of sentiment.

Do you manage to travel to India sometimes?

I come to India for two months every year to regain contact with Indian culture and try to interact with cultured Indians. One needs to revisit the magnificent art of our country

spread over Khajuraho, Ajanta and Ellora.

But, am I right that the early part of your artistic life was influenced by western art?

My creativity has gone through 2-3 important periods. Indeed, from 1950-80, it was influenced by western, or more specifically, French art. From around 1975, I tried to incorporate Indian ethnography, themes and symbolism like the Bindu and Mandala.

How did the Bindu germinate in your repertoire of works?

Actually, it traces back to my childhood. My teacher at primary school in Nagpur drew a Bindu on the wall and asked me to concentrate on it. I was scared that I had erred and he would punish me. I still remember his name was Nandalal Jharia. But, he assured me that nothing was amiss. After a while, he came back and was very pleased that I was still staring at it. He told my father that he was very happy with me and would give me private tuitions.

Since then, the Bindu has stuck in your mind, is it?

Yes. And, just think, millions of Hindu women wear it everyday. All the five major colours -- blue, red, orange, yellow and white -- emerge from the black Bindu. This goes back to over 30 centuries. They are also the five most important colours in any painting.

But, what made you go to France, when at the PAG, you decided to break free from western art?

To break away from any influence, you had to understand that art. To really gauge Communism, it was necessary that you visited Russia. That was the reason I went to Paris. One couldn't see Van Gogh in Bombay. Of course, I was coming to India even in the old days and referring to Indian resources.

Which western artists have you been most influenced by?

Cezanne, Van Gogh, Picasso, Gauguin, Modigliani, to mention just few. They came from different parts of the world. Just like Persian poets journeyed to Agra to write.

What is your observation of the Indian art boom that suddenly burst open in the last 6-7 years?

It did not actually happen suddenly. For

this, artists of our generation have worked for decades.

But, hasn't that turned many artists overtly commercial-minded?

Well, it's painful if the art world is dominated by commerce. Money was never our aim as painters. It was the creation of art that mattered. That's why when art dealers, who are commercial-minded, come to my studio in Paris and start bargaining with me, I deliberately raise my price tags.

But, hasn't this fantastic growth in

prices helped so many artists who were known to struggle?

I agree my life has changed, too. One should not neglect finance. True, art prices have shot up at auctions. But, when I show across the world, my singular pursuit still is to create quality works. I'm also choosy about galleries I exhibit in.

How many hours do you usually work everyday nowadays?

I paint for about 3-4 hours everyday. I also spend a lot of time thinking. In fact, I'm thinking all the while. And, I pen my thoughts in Hindi and English. Some of these writings have been published in France.

After this long journey as an artist, what is your final realisation?

Truth always prevails. Commerce prevents that.....



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