

# "DELHI HASN'T LEARNT TO RESPECT ITS ARTISTS YET"

ONE OF CITY'S MOST TALKED ABOUT ARTISTE COUPLE, **SATISH AND KIRAN GUJRAL** HAVE BEEN WITNESS TO THE CITY'S CHANGING LANDSCAPE, LITERATURE, FOOD, ART AND HUMOUR. **RANA SIDDIQUI ZAMAN** TRAVELS DOWN THE MEMORY LANE WITH THEM



Photos: SHIV KUMAR PUSHKAR



One cannot mistake Satish and Kiran Gujral's home at 16 Peroz Shah Road in Lajpat Nagar for anything else than that of a painter, sculptor and architect. It is highly personalised. There are paintings on almost all the walls, sculpted and carved furniture, the furnishings showcase their love for miniatures, craft and folklore; a lounge with minimal seating, and a vast garden separated by a glass wall provides the perfect setting for a cosy home.

Satish is temporarily restricted to a wheelchair due to some serious injuries. The octogenarian prefers sitting here with Kiran, his "shadow" as she is referred to in the art and poetry fraternity.

If painter and poetess Kiran is a picture of dignity and affection, Satish is flamboyant. If Kiran chooses her words carefully, Satish has a wry sense of humour and cares two hoots about what comes out of his mouth. A shy Kiran reserves her smiles to a minimum, while Satish loves to laugh uninhibitedly and lace his speech with verses from Urdu poetry.

Satish lost his capacity to speak and hear at the age of 10 due to high fever and was bedridden for quite a while. He eventually regained his speech after treatment, but not hearing. He mostly reads Kiran's lip movements before answering most questions.

The conversation begins over coconut water and a piece of cake on their daughter's birthday. "I came to Delhi from Jhelum in Pakistan in 1939 and lived here for a while. I remember the stretch from Tilak Bridge till Delhi Gate was empty. Today's Indian Medical Association building at ITO was yesterday's jail."

After the Partition, the government

distributed land among the refugees according to what they had left behind in Pakistan. The veteran recalls: "Sunder Nagar was a graveyard then. Most of it was marshy because the Yamuna would flow till there and the water would stagnate. The then government thought it should be developed. I wanted to make Sunder Nagar my home, but my brother said: 'Kabristan jame ke aur bhi raaste hain' [There are other ways to go to a graveyard]."

The three Gujral brothers, including former Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral, received 200 square yards each. "In all, we got a 600 square yard plot at Nizamuddin. But my brother said: 'Nizamuddin is a jungle. Who will live there?' He sold off his land. Next, there was an auction for land at Jor Bagh. We rushed there and I successfully bid on a piece of land worth Rs.5,000. However, we had to deposit Rs.2,000 there and we did. Again my brother said: 'Hamare Rs.2,000 doob gaye' [The Rs.2,000 have gone to waste]. But today Jor Bagh is a much sought-after area. It wasn't a mistake. The way land prices in Delhi have hiked is phenomenal since we came here."

The painter and muralist who sells a small oil on canvas for no less than Rs.50 lakh today, says art wise the Capital has grown quite a lot, but architecture wise it still needs to come of age.

Recalling how his first black and white work on Partition showing

sad and wailing women received the national award, he nostalgically remembered how difficult it was to sell art work then.

"Five artists — [M.F.] Husain, Ram Kumar, Samant, Amina and I decided to hold a show and sell our works. We got a 'hut' on Old Mill Road. Char din ho gaye, koi nahi aaya [Four days into the show and not a single soul turned up]. Not even our parents and siblings! But fifth day our parents came. Maa-baap bhi isliye aa gaye ki kahin hum khudkhushi na kar lain [Our parents only turned up to keep us from killing ourselves]," he bursts out laughing. "On the fifth day, we decided to go somewhere. We told the guard: 'Take care of our works. We will give you Rs.2 for your trouble.' He agreed. Soon after we left, someone informed us that something was

being sold. We rushed back — happy and in a hurry. Guess what had been sold? A catalogue for 25 annas!"

On how art grew in the city, Delhi's first burnt-wood sculptor says: "When I came back from Mexico to Delhi [on a scholarship in 1952], I wanted to sell my works. So, I went to Dhoomimal [now an art gallery] at Connaught Place. There was Kumar Gallery [Delhi's second art gallery that came up in 1956] where Virender Kumar worked for Rs.75 per month. When he saw me, he whispered: 'I want to start a gallery of my own. Can you help? I need four to five artists to give me their works.' It was done. He opened a small gallery in a corner at Sunder Nagar. Today he is a billionaire. His growth says much about the artistic

trends and progress of art in Delhi."

At this, Kiran joins in: "Now there are more artists, more galleries and more promotions, accordingly there is more hunger for, quick recognition too. Parents also encourage that. Some often present them as caricatures. It hinders their artistic growth. Earlier the speed was slow and steady. Artists used to learn from their seniors, discussions and studies."

Architecturally, the couple believes Delhi still has to go a long way. "It has", as Kiran says, "only gone worse".

Moans the veteran's wife: "The government has put ceramic fountains everywhere. It disturbs the traffic. The only great statue is that of the Dandi March on Teen Murti Marg. The worst mural are at the Old Delhi Station and some horrible ones at the international airport. If it doesn't connect with a common man, what purpose does it serve?"

"The statues of public figures and their faces are not up to the mark. I think it will take them time to understand what kind of work should be put up in public spaces," says the architect, who designed the Belgium Embassy in New Delhi, which was selected by the International Forum of Architects as one of the 1,000 best built buildings in the 20th Century all over the world.

"Though art has grown, but respect for artists has not changed for the better," adds the Padma Vibhushan recipient.

Poetically-inclined, Satish also feels that while literary and cultural events have increased, Delhi now lacks a singular place where the entire city would like to descend, as was the case with the India-Pakistan mushaira.

"When the first mushaira was held in Delhi after Partition, almost the entire city reached there. As [noted poet] Hafeez Jalandhri began, it started raining heavily. But no one moved. He recited a moving nazm [poetic rendition]:

"... Jab se hui Hind ki taqseem Kaun sa muqaddar hai jo mehfooz hai?"

[...Ever since Hindustan got divided, whose fate is safe?]

People started crying. The rain only helped their tears flow faster. I wrote this nazm and took it to Mexico along with me. It helped me reconcile during my weak moments."

A food lover, Satish has always enjoyed being in Delhi.

"Food habits of Delhi have undergone tremendous change — pheyly to yahan sirf gol gappe milte thay [Only gol gappe were available here earlier]. The standard of catering has gone up. I travel a lot and have to eat out too. I can assure you that Delhi offers the best food as compared to any other metropolitan in the country."

As the chat progresses, Kiran excuses herself as she isn't feeling well. After posing for some pictures, she holds her walker and says: "Next time you come, you will see me walking without this."

Satish, who was down with severe chest congestion, adds: "Thank you for making me happy today. Remembering old days in Delhi is as delightful as looking at a beautiful woman growing old gracefully," he grins mischievously.

The artists who hardly sleep adds: "Mujhe neend nahi aati ab, aur sari beemariyan bhi ho chuki [I hardly sleep now and suffer from various ailments]. I still work for 7-8 hours every day." No wonder he is ready for a group show with artist Jogen Chowdhury at the New York Art Fair (to be held soon), a retrospective in Delhi next year and a public museum through the Satish Gujral Foundation that his son Mohit has created in Gurgaon.



Some years ago, the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation asked me to decorate any station I thought was the best. They chose Connaught Place and I agreed. They asked me: 'What will you make?' I said: 'Something to do with speed'. They agreed and gave me an advance amount. I made some sketches. Since they couldn't 'discover' speed in it, they demanded their money back!"

Travelling in Delhi required a great deal of thought. Log baigadi mahi jate they Humayun ka makbara dekhne ke liye [People used to travel in bullock carts to see Humayun's Tomb]. Once I went to a friend's house in Lajpat Nagar and told him I wanted to see Humayun's Tomb. He said "See, it's right there... over your head". I could see it from his rooftop. There was nothing in between because the area was empty."

