

Remembering MF Husain: Was India deserving of his genius?

Parth MN

While travelling through Barcelona last year, I paid a visit to The Museum Picasso, which is Pablo Picasso's biggest museum in the world. Located in a beautiful, serene lane, it is housed in five adjoining medieval palaces, following the architecture of the quintessential Gothic civil Catalan. It accommodates more than 3500 works of the iconic artist.

Generally, Picasso is associated and credited with Paris, and rightly so. He lived there for the longest time and even died in city. However, the fact that the majority of his first 20 years were spent in Barcelona is somewhere overshadowed. Once he moved out of Barcelona, he never came back, largely because of the General Franco regime. Picasso had categorically told his lifelong friend and secretary Jaume Sabartes, who was also the driving force behind this museum in Barcelona, that he will not step foot in Spain



as long as Franco remained the ruler.

Barcelona was so proud of the fact that Picasso spent his formative years in their city. The subtext of the whole atmosphere in the museum was—Picasso may have become a star and received glory in Paris, but the seeds were sown here. It seemed like an attempt to reclaim some of the credit for Picasso's genius.

I came out of the museum fascinated, overwhelmed, and a bit ashamed as well. While it was inspiring to see the way Barcelona had preserved their culture and their artist, it was depressing to recollect that India had thrown out MF Husain, who was a special invitee along with Picasso at the Sao Paulo Biennial in Brazil in 1971. Let alone being proud of the fact that a globally acclaimed and revered artist was born and brought up in India, we forced him to live in exile in the last years of his life; we humiliated him. Why? Because he treated Hindu gods and deities as visual stimuli, depicting them unclothed.

Following the publishing of those paintings in a magazine in 1996, several cases were filed



against him. His house was attacked, art work vandalised. He even received death threats. Almost all right wingers endorsed it. And eventually, the iconic artist had to leave the country. The way these events unfolded was disgraceful and deplorable. Is Hinduism so fragile that a few paintings can hamper its credibility? And more importantly, why is the Hindu religion called tolerant then?

Husain's importance to Indian art goes back to the 1940s. He was

one of the vital members of the Progressive Artists Group, the most influential group of modern artists in India, formed in 1947. The objective of the Progressive Artists' Group was to shun the revivalist nationalism, developed by Bengal school of art and to encourage and augment an Indian avant-garde. They wanted to paint with absolute freedom for content and technique. Husain, along with FN Souza, SH Raza, SK Bakre and a few more, changed the shape of

Indian contemporary art. "During those days", Husain had written in Frontline, "the Royal Academy, which was British-oriented, and the revivalist school in Mumbai, which was not a progressive movement, were the two prevalent schools of thought. These two we decided to fight, and we demolished them. The movement to get rid of these influences and to evolve a language that is rooted in our own culture was a great movement. It was important because any great change in a nation's civilisation begins in the field of culture. Culture is always ahead of other political and social movements". He had further mentioned, "Our concern was to evolve not only art as a profession to make a living, but to do serious research to evolve a language for Indian contemporary art. It had to be rooted in our culture and all the points of reference had to be ours, but it had to use modern techniques as well".

The paradox, though, is that the man who played a pivotal role in incorporating Indian culture in Indian contemporary art and shared such an intimate relationship with it, was chastised on cul-

tural basis. However, Husain is not the only stalwart to have been mistreated by Indians and revered by the world.

You do not have to be developed to realise the value of your artists and cherish them. You have to be cultured.

Even India has an abundance of art and culture. But how many museums of Husain, Raja Ravi Varma, Narayan Bendre, SH Raza do we have? Moreover, VS Gaitonde, one of India's foremost abstract painters, did rounds in India only after his painting was sold for 23.7 crore rupees at Christie's debut auction in India.

It is a tragic irony that Picasso, who stayed away from Barcelona, is celebrated there, and Husain, who wished to live in his country, was humiliated here. On the occasion of his death anniversary, the injustice served to the great man still rankles. He deserved a lot better. The least, he deserved to die in his homeland.

Full column on : <http://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/standpoint-remembering-mf-husain-was-india-deserving-of-a-genius-like-him-1994433>