

Arts & Culture

Staying with bindu despite decades in France

Exhibitions/Krishna Chaitanya

THE works of over forty Indian artists who have lived in France were on display in Rabindra Bhavan during the week in an exhibition organised by the embassy of France.

The action of ambience on sensibility is not mechanical and deterministic. Remember Amrita Shergil? She was one of the earliest of our artists to study in France (1929-34) but the consequences could not have been predicted. In the two decades before she reached there, cubism, fauvism, Chirico's surrealism and the differing abstractions of Kandinsky, Delaunay and Joan Miro had stabilised themselves as artistic fashions and paintings were continuing to be done in these styles. But Amrita never attempted any of them. Further we have this extraordinary statement by her: "It seems paradoxical but I know for certain that had we not come away to Europe, I should perhaps never have realised that a fresco from Ajanta or a small piece of (Indian) sculpture in the Musée Guimet is worth more than the whole Renaissance." It seems we roam the world and respond only to things that resonate to something deep within us. Maeterlinck wrote: "Whether you climb to the top of the mountain or go down to the village, whether you travel to the ends of the earth or take a walk round the house, you will meet only yourself on the roads of chance... If Socrates opens the door, he will find Socrates on the threshold and will have a chance to be wise".

This is definitely not being uncharitable in respect of the exhibition which in fact has given us insights contrary to the routinely expected. Raza has been living in France for decades, but he has

stayed with the Bindu and its cosmogonic symbolism to which he was exposed in his boyhood. The Tantrism of Akkittam and Viswanadhan who too have been living in Paris for long is not much different from that of the artists who have not been to France. In most cases, the duration of stay has been short: one year in the case of artists who got French government scholarships, two or three months in the case of people who got fellowships, two or three weeks in the case of artists who got invited to exhibitions. But above all this question remains: with the idioms becoming international, can one today look at a painting and proclaim its provenance? Even Narendra Srivastava's calligraphic "Karma" belongs to the modern age of the machine, not exclusively to India.

The paintings in the first solo exhibition (Vadehra Gallery) by Dharmendra Rathore who just got his MFA have highbrow titles like "Organic Analysis", jumbled images difficult to decipher; I must confess I have been unable to unscrew their inscrutable meaning. But the catalogue introduction says: "Colours comes (sic) out to resume his emotion whom he spreads with vigour. Holistic beauty spread over the canvas drenches everyone with visual pleasure." And a colleague says he is one of the artists who "reflect the anarchic march of market relations roughshod over the remnants of a feudal society falsely kept alive by colonialism to stock its slave army with." Got it? We can pass on to the other shows. There is promise in the paintings of Bharti Kher (AIFACS) but just now she seems to be rather too close to the manner of Subodh Gupta. The pencil and pastel portraits of Katalin

Ubornyk from Hungary (AIFACS) attest to her craft competence, her impressions of India show that she has fallen in love with its life and legends.

The World Press Photo show has been noticed in other columns, but one implication of it needs to be brought out. Many viewers reported the feeling that some of the photos were too shocking to be exhibited. Words and images bring the realities of the world out of the shadow and confront us with them. We thereby lose our innocence in regard to them and are reminded of our responsibility for them or in respect of them. Our epoch is that of apocalyptic images, the seventh seal has burst open and death is striding forth in many forms. If we don't develop the strength to look at it in the face, we are lost even without a fight. Extensive surveys by psychologists have shown that people refrain from reading about the megakill capacity of nuclear weapons because they cannot summon up the courage. Other photo shows during the week were on happier aspects. Brian Lanker's portraits of black women who changed America (American Center) compose a saga and hold out hopes for the world. The exhibition on tradition and modernity at Alliance Francaise had amusing photos like that of the priest, dhoti-clad, torso bare, head shaven, going about on a scooter.

Rajan Kapoor (Triveni) presented a lively coverage of Pushkar. Scenes veiled by the dust raised by cattle in the sands were pictorially the best though Jean Louis Nou has some pictures of the fair of this type, built up in many planes with a classical strength of composition recalling Poussin or Lorraine. Sharat Kumar's photos of Ladakh (Srishti Gallery) were pictures of a peaceful pastorage.