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## Life Comes Full Circle For Raza

Vinita Faridi

LITTLE DID a small boy, growing up in Babaria, Madhya Pradesh, realise that the small dot drawn by his teacher to help him concentrate will play such a significant part in his later life. Because the *Bindu* to Paris-based artist Sayed Haider Raza, in town to participate in his 80th birthday celebrations at the ITC Maurya Sheraton last evening, as also an exhibition showing at Vadehra Art Gallery till March 5, "is the most important symbol of Indian aesthetics, the core of existence." The occasion also marked the release of a limited edition book on the veteran artist written by Ashok Vajpeyi and published by the Paris-based Ravi Kumar.

Despite living in Paris for the greater part of his adult life, if Raza is still Indian to the core, is "because my roots are intact. I have imbibed all good things that France has to offer, but also retained all that India gave me because what are roots if you can't carry them with you wherever you go."

But the significance of his childhood references hit Raza hard only in 1978 when, on the invitation of the Madhya Pradesh government, he visited his home state and went back to his school. "That is when my inner journey started, bringing into sharp focus all the tangible realities of my mind. Things that had been significant to me, whether in Nagpur or Bombay (J.J. School of Art), or Paris (*Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts*),

came back with a new significance. The occasion was nothing short of the grace of God for me."

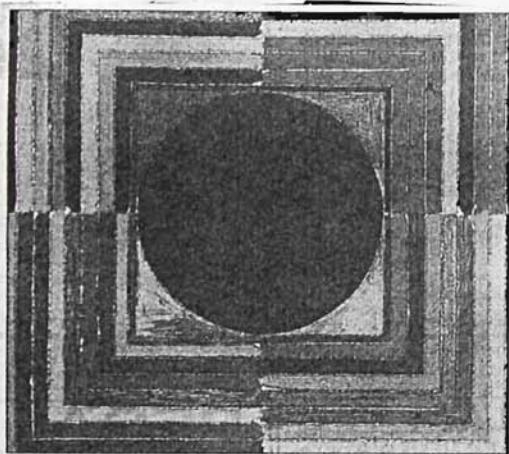
And it set Raza thinking. "I live in the land of Descartes, who had said 'I exist because I think', and this freedom of thought is important to me," says the artist, in whose works black is the one colour conspicuous by its presence. "To me colour perception is very important," says Raza, "and black is the mother of all colours. How can I complete a work without the mother."

Says Ashok Vajpeyi, who has known Raza for a long time, but wrote the book over repeated interactions with Raza in Paris, "The significant thing about him is that he is an exile by choice, he chose to stay on in Paris not out of compulsion but because of a human relationship (Raza is married to the French artist Janine Mongil-lat), but he has created a geography for himself even there, which is so Indian." Like S.H. Raza's works.

Sayed Haider Raza, the Paris-based Indian artist believes in carrying his roots wherever he goes



PHOTO: MANOJ VERMA



A painting by Raza.

## Paris-based artist returns with show in Delhi, Mumbai

RENUKA NARAYANAN  
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 16

**N**EXT week, eminent Paris-based painter Raza (born Sayed Haider Raza on February 22 in Babaria, MP) will be coming home for a huge 80th birthday party-exhibition-book release in Mumbai and Delhi.

And this even as the art world is abuzz with the rumour that this important contemporary artist — a founder of the Progressive Artists Group and alumnus of the prestigious Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts — is to be awarded a top honour by the French government. Though, Raza himself denies knowledge of this.

But whether he gets to wear a ribbon on his lapel or not, India is revving up for a major show of his kundalini-inspired works on February 21, presented by Sharan Apparao of Chennai at the Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai. A week later, Vadehra Gallery in the Capital will organise a smaller event.

Two limited edition portfolios of Raza's work will also be released in Delhi and Mumbai along with a book of conversations and poems with bureaucrat-writer Ashok Vajpeyi. They are being produced by Bookwise (New Delhi) and Paris-based publisher Ravi Kumar, who has known Raza for 44

years and was responsible for presenting M.F. Husain in Paris in 1960. Kumar, who switched from being an art impresario to a publisher in 1965 "because I couldn't deal with Indian artists' egos, and hated buying and selling", is, however, all admiration for Raza: "He has absolutely no ego, because of his inner search."

### Paris-based artist returns with show

Raza's studio-home in Paris is witness to his spiritual seekings, with a *shivling*, a South Indian bronze idol of Balakrishna and ample prayer books. Situated on the second floor of a 17th Century convent building on the Rue de Charonne, which became a residential quarter after the French

Revolution and is now a protected monument, the painter lives in the apartment with his French wife Janine Mongillat (herself a painter of repute, with a forthcoming series on *Birds of Varanasi*) and his black cat Bona, whom he found in the little village of Gorbio, 15 km from Monte Carlo.

"But my birth was 20 km from the banks of Narmadaji and *ganga* still flows in my veins," declares Raza and vehemently asserts the worth of India's syncretic culture. His father, whom he describes as a "pavitra Muslim of the Prophet's lineage", was the Forest Range Warden in-charge of Kanha Kisli National Park and Raza grew up happily amidst Gonds and Tribals, with frequent house visits from anthropologist Verrier Elwin.

"I was extremely fortunate that my first teachers were highly learned men who shared their knowledge generously with me — my primary school teacher Nandlalji Jaria drew a *bindu* on the white wall of the school verandah and, at my father's request, taught me to concentrate. My other teachers, Beniprasadji and Gaurishankarji, were equally

immense influences. I can feel their power in my life and work even now. My plea to young India is to please understand your culture properly," he said.

Upanishad literally means to sit in, total obedience at your guru's feet. Islam means total submission to God. These ideas are harmonious, not contradictory, says Raza. "My *Devi* in my studio is a presence I say *namaskar* to before I start painting and pray to when the painting doesn't work!"

Though the Razas have no children, they have "adopted" deserving young Indian painters through the Raza Foundation based in Mumbai and administered by bureaucrat-writer Ashok Vajpeyi and art gallery owner Arun Vadehra. Raza apparently donates 50 per cent of his earnings to the foundation; personally sees and buys the works of such artists and gifts them to various institutions.

Two cash awards of Rs 1 lakh each will be announced to two artists and one poet this year. "I went through a tough time initially. Now that my pictures sell, I would like to be of use to others," says Raza gently.

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