

The Hitavada SUNDAY PLUS

Nagpur, Sunday, Feb. 7, 1993.

RAZA begins by talking about his life, his work, going far down memory lane to his early days in the Nagpur School of Art. "Bapuraoji was my teacher, he was like a mother to me. Raza has many loving memories of his guru". I was just seventeen then, very young and naive. Not only did Bapuraoji open up new vistas for me and give me a whole new perspective of art, I was also treated like a family member, the kind of affection and attention I got is something which I'll never forget". Raza's voice is visibly choked with emotion. The Nagpur School of Art, which gave a talent like Raza and many others, has ironically closed down since then, has become a thing of the past, leaving behind only



Padmashri Sayed Haider Raza began his foray into art in Nagpur. Today, he is internationally known and world famous. When he was in Nagpur a few days back, he spoke on various topics, on philosophy, on art, on life and culture. He recalled fond memories of his roots here and spoke nostalgically of his art school and teachers.

fond memories.

Instilled with a new confidence, Raza left for Bombay, where he studied at the J.J. School of Art, simultaneously getting exposed to polarities of style, in the form of the traditional, decorative idiom of his teacher Ahiwasi and the academism of Langhammer. In a none too congenial ambience, Raza plunged into the waves of modernism sweeping the city since independence. The progressive Artist group, founded in 1948 with Souza, Husain, Raza, Ara, Gade and Bakre as its members was a tour de force. The group's achievement in every sense was a

land-mark in Modern Indian Art. "We took the liberty to feel free to break away from the shackles of academism" Raza asserts. The artists, were, in a way, the trend setters, for their art stemmed from a synthesis of their Indian roots and the 20th century art movements of the West. Fame and fortune came almost together, but the greatest break an artist could desire came in the form of a French Govt. Scholarship which, found Raza in Paris, the Mecca of artists and art connoisseurs, in 1950.

Raza studied at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts from 1950 to 1953, married

his French wife, artist Janine Mongillat and preferred to settle down in France, paying visits to India with ritualistic regularity. His attachment to his country is strong, it is from his roots that Raza derives a life force which is central to his work. Nature has always been a driving force, a constant companion since childhood that was spent in the thickest of the forests in Babaria in Madhya Pradesh. The banks of the meandering Narmada, the formidable Satpura ranges... memories permanently etched in mind. "The village was a fairy land of colours, then came the hallucinating nights and again the daybreak

bringing in security." These two contrasting aspects of Nature still dominate his life and are an integral part of his painting.

"Painting" Raza asserts, "is a kind of 'tapasya' or meditation. It requires a single mindedness, it possesses you. He compare it with the process of gestation and birth". One has to give it time, give it intense contem-

plation only then is born a painting that breathes life, a work that has a distinct personal connotation."

Indian miniature painting, especially the vibrant Jain and Rajput miniatures and the colourful Indian textiles have also been vital influences in Raza's work-their red-hot colour palette, the spatial divisions, the animated forms have always fascinated him

as is evident from paintings like "Rajasthan" and "Saurashtra" yet, Raza has always been open to new ideas.

yearning to assimilate all that was great in Western Art.

Raza's initial years in Paris were extremely fruitful. "I went to France with a desire to learn, I wanted to be close to artists whom I'd seen till then in reproductions. I wanted to see the

facet of a living art centre, to feel its pulse. The first few years in Paris were tough, but rewarding, and finally, when Raza was honoured with the prestigious 'Prix de la critique award' in 1956, it was certain that the artist had arrived.

Raza admits that his vision matured with the passage of time, the most significant work having been done after 1975. There was a thought process, the development of a new sensibility. "My present work is the result of two parallel enquiries. First, it aimed at pure plastic order. Second, it concerns the theme of nature. Both have converged into a single point and become inseparable".

Raza waxes eloquent about the 'Bindu' which plays a pivotal role in his work. The big black point is the very genesis of creation, flowing outwards from light and moving into forms and colours as well as vibration, energy, sound, space and time. Raza, however, clarifies that his bindu has nothing to do with Tantric imagery which he is aware to be too complex.

INDIAN music and poetry have been a constant source of inspiration and delight to Raza, some of the contemporary poets being among his close friends. Fragments of poetic verse inscribed in Devnagari lend a new dimension to Raza's painting and so, when Raza inscribes 'मा, लोटकर जब आउंगा' in the painting titled 'Ma' revealing his nostalgia for his mother land, the words cease to be mere calligraphy.

Raza has a special attachment to Nagpur, the city where he was initiated into

the realm of art. This region has time and again produced remarkable talent like Gai-tonde, Ambadas, B. Prabha and B. Vithal, and Bapuraoji Athavale. During the course of his stay, Raza met young artists like Jayant Mairal, Prabhakar Patil and others, discussed their work and went into the intricacies of painting "Indian art has come of age, there are a number of artists, painters and sculptors who've carved a niche for themselves so much so that contemporary Indian art has gained significance not only in India but also abroad".

Raza said the contemporary art scene is seeing very good days. The Lalit Kala Akademi, Delhi and the Bombay Art Society are instrumental in giving encouragement to young talent. A number of galleries are coming up, there is a

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steady stream of sponsors of exhibitions. The scenario is bright, yet it does have its short-comings. Unfortunately, institutions like the Lalit Kala Akademi have fallen prey to people with vested interests, leaving out many a promising artist in the cold. Raza, himself, as an elected member of the Akademi could offer valuable suggestions, his capacity as member of the advisory board to curb these irregularities in the sacred bastions of art.

The dialogue with Raza revealed many a known and unknown facet of the great artist, his work, his philosophy. Raza last exhibited his paintings at the NCPA in Bombay in 1992. It will indeed be a privilege of all art lovers to have the artist and his art in India again in the near future.

