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We were in the full bloom of youth and energy when the country won its independence in 1947. It was a period of big +-----+ changes; they affected us intensely. After a triumphant, non-violent movement, quite unique in history, violence erupted again, choking the enthusiasm inspired by national liberation. We lived through many tragic events then, especially the outbreak of communal frenzy and above all the assassination of Gandhiji. Overnight, everything appeared dark, despairing and empty.

Gradually, we emerged from the void. Gandhiji's example - his thought and action - had had an electrifying effect. For as long as we could remember we had lived our daily problems with resignation. Now we wanted to understand the forces that shaped us, the destiny that was to be ours. There began a restless period of enquiry into our values, our culture, our art, our life itself. And Bombay offered us its hidden resources.

The city seemed forbidding with its tall buildings, rush, noise and wealth. The erudition of intellectuals in particular baffled me. Each one appeared to advise, to offer ready-made solutions. Unread and naive, I could scarcely conceal my nervousness. Yet, I was attentive and determined. I made a discreet entry as an art student. I needed time to understand, to assimilate.

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Brought up as I was in the natural reserves of the forests of Madhya Pradesh, I was still living their rhythm. Education in village schools, with teachers wise like "rishis", and parental love and discipline at home, had given me a ~~awareness~~ of purpose, faith and a sense of direction. From "Idjtihad" to "Bindu" was the same lesson: a personal effort towards concentration and reflection.

But there was a radical change of place and climate, of themes and means. Adaptation was not easy. I found it very difficult to shift from "Manushya bodha" to the complexities of psychology and psycho-analysis, from religious faith to dialectical materialism, from evolutionary change to a revolutionary one, from folk art and popular imagery to the new trends in modern painting and sculpture. There was much to learn from the rationality then projected on every subject: family, society, economy and politics, religion and art. These were exciting days

and I went from discovery to discovery, open-minded and unbiased, inquiring, yet bent on reaching my own conclusions.

It was a privilege to be young; a responsibility too. I remember having classified human beings into two categories : those who were "inspired" and wanted to work, and the rest. Hence, meetings were inevitable and we recognised each other quickly. There was a growing effervescence in Bombay's art world in those days. Many ideas were in the air and these were shared by several painters in the city working even in isolation. ~~Some had left discouraged, yet others had~~ come from different parts of the country with their own individual temperaments and obsessions. They aimed at a new and vital art expression. Contemporary French art and the German expressionists had made a strong impact on us. Rajput and Jain paintings appeared more vital than the prestigious Mogul and Persian miniatures. We began to realise that the relevance of painting was not only in the subject or theme, but in a newly perceived formal order and colour orchestration. The insipid imitations of the realism of the European school seemed dull and unconvincing even when the themes were religious. At the same time, the revivalist movement of the Bengal School, despite the laudable efforts it made to instill an awareness of our own cultural heritage, seemed to produce "literary" works, sentimental and delicate, and unresponsive to the pace and anguish of our times. Only Rabindra Nath Tagore's work revealed a distinctly pictorial approach. Jamini Roy, too, brought about the meaningful revival of folk art. But it was Amrita Sher Gil who emerged as the most significant painter of those years. Alas, she died at the age of 38, in December 1941.

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It is in this context that we met in Bombay during the years 1947-1950 and formed the Progressive Artists Group with six founder members : F.N. Souza, M.F. Husain, K.H. Ara, S.K. Bakre and myself. Francis Newton Souza was the Secretary of the Group and wrote our manifesto on the occasion of our first collective exhibition which was opened by Dr. Mulk Raj Anand in July 1949. The exhibition was well attended. It made a big impact and received both warm appreciation and adverse criticism. ~~None~~ was indifferent. The art patrons lamented the lack of patronage for the arts. Intellectuals propounded elaborated aesthetic theories. Patriots decried modern art. On the other hand, a few art critics and genuine art lovers, both Indian and European, recognised the dynamism of this new beginning and gave us whole-hearted support. The event could no longer be ignored and the group had to be reckoned with as a force.

K.H. Ara,

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Our research continued. We launched into a period of intense study and work and held our exhibitions in Bombay and in almost all big cities in India. Two major exhibitions stirred us greatly then. The first was a vast exhibition of ancient Indian art in Delhi. Once again, the vitality of our sculpture and painting was brought home to us. The other exhibition consisted of ~~the~~ large prints of modern French painters presented by the French Consulate in Bombay exposing us to the works of Braque, Rouault and Matisse. Irving Stone's "Lust For Life" revealed the passionate life of Vincent van Gogh. We were seized by the desire to see the original works in international art centres and ultimately some of us left for Europe. Krishen Khanna, Gaïtonde and Samant joined us to enlarge the group. We kept in touch ~~with~~ each other. Our being abroad was no handicap. On the contrary, the first success and recognition achieved in Paris or London only confirmed the validity of our work and opened new horizons to contemporary Indian painting and sculpture.

In all artistic research, at some point, the artist is eventually alone. The fraternal association, the constant meetings and discussions, the analysis and exchange of views, so necessary in the formative stage, become redundant. An inner dialogue begins. ~~With time,~~ Almost every member of the group responded to his own personal yearnings, impulses and intuitions and followed his own distinct path. The group had outlived its purpose and by mutual agreement it was dissolved in 1956.

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Many things of those times - visions and impressions, feelings and insights and more - remain with me to this day. How and why and what they do to me and to my work I cannot say.

S.H. Raza  
Paris, November 1983