

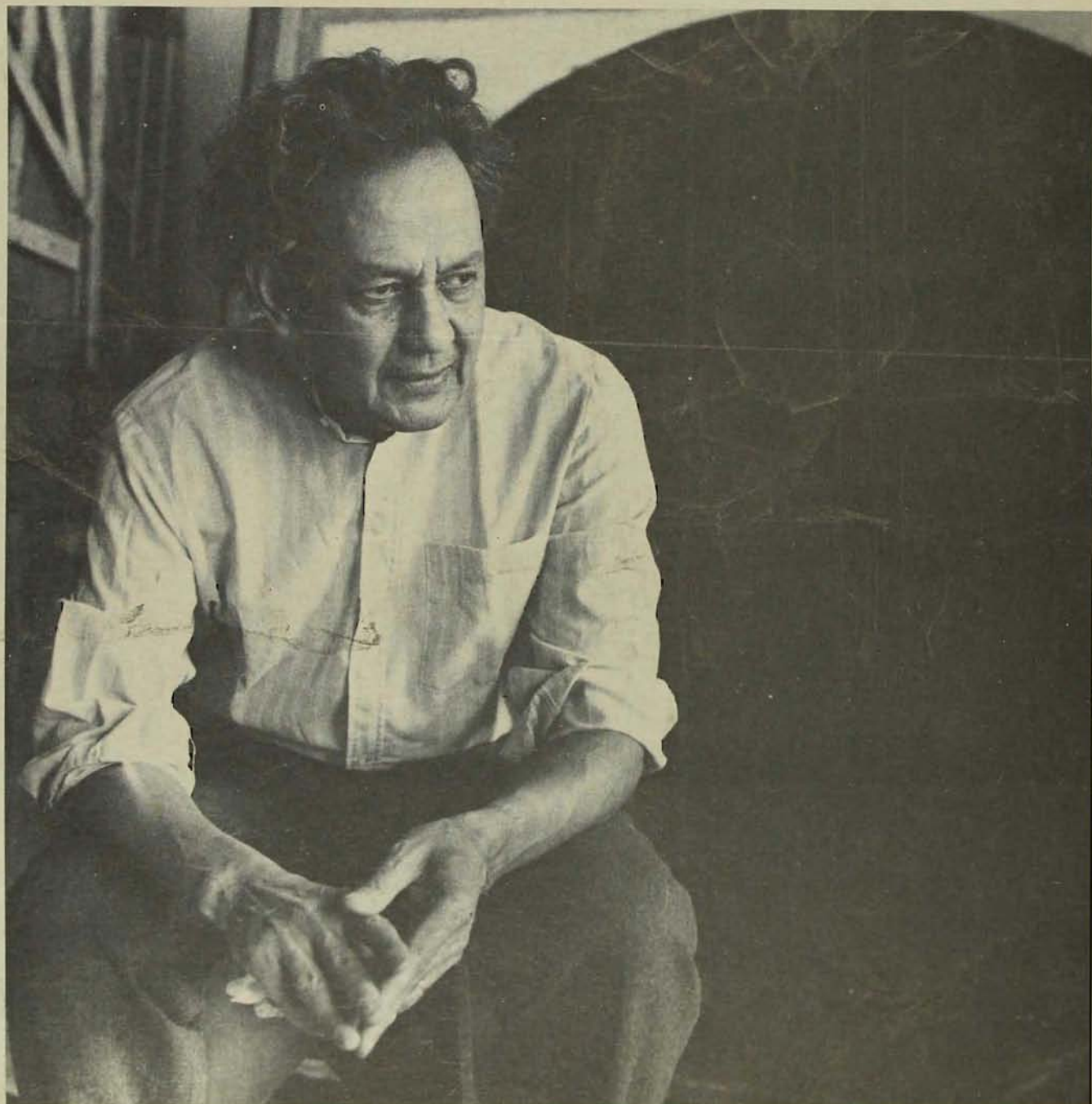


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is a trained restorer and works at  
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*Photographs courtesy Raza,  
Chemould Publications and Arts*

*From darkness there is light,  
from blackness  
there is colour*

The canvasses of  
Sayed Haider Raza





frontiers protected against the outsider", says the group. What it actually does is to destroy its cultural identity and adopt emergent all India patterns. Whether you go to the northeast or southwest, traditional culture is dying. At best, it is being mummified, paraded and put into museums. Lifestyles, customs, costumes architecture, are rapidly becoming the same. Where they are still different from the so called "mainstream", people are growing ashamed of them. In Kerala, Gulf money has spawned pink, green and mauve concrete. As status symbols, traditional houses no longer qualify. In Mizoram, bamboo and thatch are as unfashionable as local attire. Jeans and T-shirts are rampant everywhere; colas are drunk in place of coconut milk. Everybody sees the same Hindi movies or local imitations of them. Cinema, like death, is the great leveller.

As the cry of culture! grows, so does the westernisation. Admittedly, differences persist; in Chandragutti, Shimoga district, Karnataka, women marched naked for several kilometres to the temple of Goddess Renukamba this March. But the "mainstream" looked on, disapproved, took photographs. They got beaten up, but soon they may not, because the naked walk, "immoral" to the disciples of nineteenth century British missionaries, may not take place. The participators will feel more naked than they do now. There was a time when people did not know such a custom existed; next year it may be on BBC screens, making the practice "shameful". The topless tribals Sunil Janah photographed in the fifties will be in jeans and T-shirts in 2000 AD. More English will be spoken and less

of the local traditions known or understood. As the smoke stacks and silicon chips spread, pre-industrial arts and skills will inevitably go out of fashion, yielding place to a noisy, garish sameness everywhere. The Assamese may today talk sentimentally about the Bihu festival, but it will, inevitably, cease to be a living form.

What then will they protect, if their culture is actually going to disappear? Perhaps it is protection from economic competition that some already seek and others may in future. Areas that are less developed seek refuge from the more developed, under the garb of culture. Sometimes the cover is religion, as in the Punjab, but actually it is the same thing. Spirituality recedes, the ethical behaviour called for by religion disappears; only the rituals remain, and their clear purpose is to bind one community against others.

Some acceptance of a dominant culture is inevitable in all successful pluralist societies. In the USSR, Russian is accepted by diverse peoples as a link language; in the USA, English was chosen by no less diverse groups. Linguistic, and therefore cultural, homogenisation is evident in China. In such a process, some advantage accrues to the original users of the language, but the inequality gradually disappears. Some of the most vital writing in English today is by non-Britishers. But in accepting Russian or English, the varied peoples of the USSR and the United States chose or agreed to the domination of a language and culture whose superiority had been proven over the centuries.

The question in India is thus of the capability of the dominant culture to gain acceptance — voluntarily. Let's face it, the Hindi speaking areas form the largest single belt of backwardness in the country. It is low in literacy, riven by casteism and is painfully short of a scientific temper. It has given little proof of dynamism in creating new blends of old and new, tradition and science, east and west. Until the other day, Hindi was little more than a collection of dialects. Today, it is a language under hasty manufacture. In the conflict of ideas, its semi-urban, semi-literate petit bourgeoisie, traditionally the progenitor of Fascism, seems to provide the fuel for a revivalist fundamentalist aggressiveness and linguistic domination. It hides behind the secular liberalism of the Nehrus that has so far made it tolerable to the rest, especially in times of crisis.

Tamil is the oldest, continuously used Indian language, Kerala with its sixty nine percent literacy, a library in every village, Bengal with its modern thinking and genius for synthesising it with tradition, Urdu with its urbane sophistication, the tribal areas with their harmonious and democratic social organization where the position of women in society is the true index; naturally find it irksome to accept the domination of a backward culture. Behind the Nehru charisma, there has been a growing uneasiness, bursting forth every now and then. And the charisma itself is wearing thin. How long will it be able to camouflage the aggressiveness of an essentially reactionary force? ■