



S. H. Raza: spiritual sensuousness

66 **O**N every journey home," said Sayed Haider Raza when he was in Bombay on one of his regular visits to India. "my most thrilling experience was to meet and mix with young art students here and in Indore, Bhopal, Gwalior and other Madhya Pradesh towns and in Nagpur."

Raza, who is now one of our most eminent painters and who has been living in France since 1950, was born in Madhya Pradesh in a small town called Babaria and went to art school in Nagpur.

"I always feel a fresh breath of life when I exchange notes with young painters," said Raza. "and I always go to Nagpur to meet my guru, Athavale."

Sadly enough, Athavale passed away shortly before Raza's last visit here in January this year. Remembering the old man made Raza nostalgic about the early years during which he learnt painting under Athavale and prepared for his exams in Bombay's Sir J. J. School of Art.

I vividly remember the water colours Raza used to paint when he had settled down in Bombay in the late '40s. They were impressionistic scenes of places such as Flora Fountain washed by the rain. The shadow of Walter Langhammer, the legendary expatriate painter who used to be a mentor of young Bombay artists then, hung heavily on these paintings.

None of these early landscapes find a place in Raza's monograph published by Chemould Publications and Arts recently. We begin instead with landscapes typical of Raza's first years in Paris, where he went on a French government scholarship in 1950. He now alternates between Paris and Gorbio, a village in Provence. His French wife, Janine Mongillat, is also an artist.

When Raza was launched at the Alliance Francaise, a film made specially for the Festival of India in France featuring Raza was also shown. In this film we see Raza walking down the inclines of the hills in Gorbio amidst lush green forests.

"This reminds me of home (in India)," he says, "where there was nature and the elements all round." Raza's father was a forest warden and so he grew up in the Madhya Pradesh jungles. In the monograph,

Raza: Painting the landscapes of the mind

Raza tells French art critic Jacques Lassagne, "The most tenacious memory of my childhood is the fear and the fascination of the Indian forest. Nights in the forest were hallucinating, daybreak brought a sentiment of security and well-being."

Day and night, light and darkness, are two aspects of Raza's life which, he says, "continue to dominate me and are an integral part of my painting. There are a multitude of variations, but it has its departure point in an experienced feeling, even if the real problems are of a plastic nature."

This is not apparent in Raza's early work from either the Bombay or the Paris days but it fills the spirit of a painting such as *Night* (1972) or *Forms of Darkness* (1981) both lush in appearance but holding open the doors of perception to a mysterious world overlapped by darkness.

In 1946, a few hot-headed young artists from Bombay formed the Progressive Artists' Group. Francis Newton Souza was the leader and Raza, like Ara, was a founder member. No two people could have been as different in temperament as Souza and Raza - the first a vocal rabble-rouser, the second a gentle soul who keeps his righteous anger charmingly in check. The group rebelled against academic tradition; but, unlike Souza, Raza was not an iconoclast who labelled even Amrita Sher-Gil a decadent influence. In fact, in the film (which is called *Paris-India, Huile sur Toile* - "Paris-India, oil on canvas"), Raza goes out of his way to mention Sher-Gil as the originator of modern art in India.

Probably guided by these differences, Souza left for London and Raza for Paris in 1950. Together with Akbar Padamsee, they held an exhibition in Paris in 1952, but by this time the Progressive Artists' Group had disbanded.

"The great problem for any artist who settles down away from his own country," Raza once told me, "is to find a proper balance between the fearless renunciation of blind tradition and an acceptance of modernity." In Raza, Pierre Gaudert, another French art scholar, tells us pointedly that Raza neither repeats traditional forms nor plagiarises modernist forms from abroad. He invents relentlessly, renewing his

artistic heritage in paintings that have confronted Klee and Kandinsky and the abstract art of the mid-20th century.

His success in overcoming this struggle between two opposing forces is clear in the expressionism of his early works such as *Village* (1956) but he came into his own much later when he started painting the landscape of his mind.

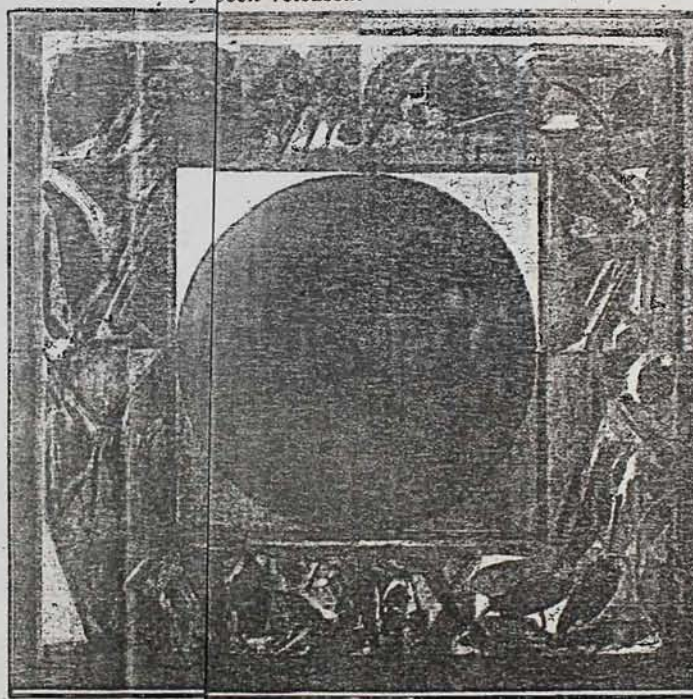
"Landscape has been at the centre of my work," Raza said to me many years ago. But it is far removed from what he was doing even in his first six years in Paris. The canvas, often painted with acrylic instead of oil, is here charged with a unique energy so that it vibrates with colour and registers subtle forms which are not static but pulsating with life. Thus we have the beautifully blue *The Sea* (1974) in which white areas are strongly projected in the midst of the azure and dark spread of acrylic on canvas.

But Raza's most haunting works flaunt colour in a manner typical of a painter working in the Indian sun. There are brick red blues and yellows which evoke the sun-drenched land of Rajasthan (*Rajasthan*, 1973), with the colours jumbling in an exotic sketchy fashion. We also have *Oasis* (1975) in which there is a more "unromantic" application of the palette knife. Finally, there is *The Earth* (1977) which destroys even more successfully all ideas of a romantic approach.

Raza has tried ceaselessly to reach for his Indian roots. The fantastic *Bindu* series, which rolled off from his studio some 10 years ago, is a culmination of this search. The concept of the "bindu" enshrined in Indian mysticism, looks upon the dot as a symbol of divine and artistic creation, as creative energy at its quintessential and as the great point which lies at the heart of all movement and form.

"The bindu challenged me on both the geometrical plane and the philosophical one," says Raza. "From the point" which was part of Klee's visual grammar emerges the circle, then the chymatic square, with its bursting forth of five coloured elements (namely earth, water, fire, wind and sky); and finally a metamorphosis of living, swarming, luxurious forms in infinite profusion such as are conjured up by the

DNYANESHWAR MADKARNI profiles S. H. Raza, the well-known Indian painter who lives in France, and a book on whose life and work has recently been released.



Raza's paintings: (clockwise from left) Bindu, Black Sun and Rajasthan: reaching for his roots

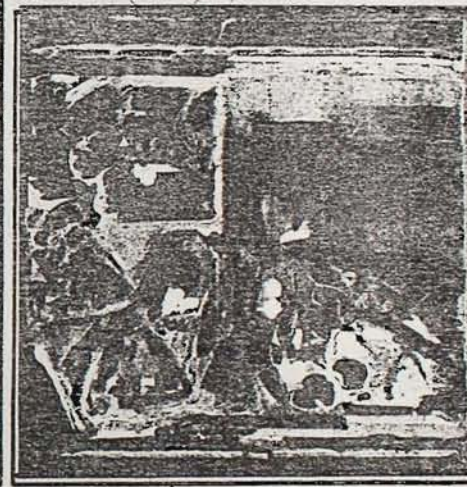
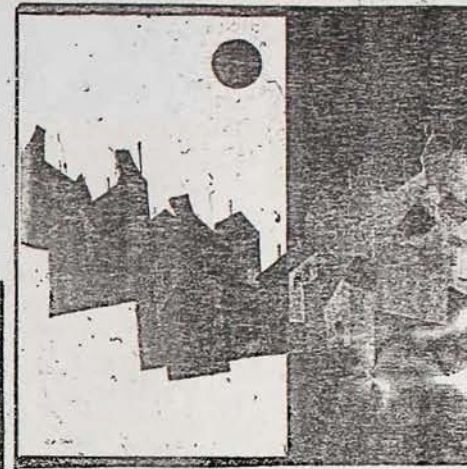
forces of Madhya Pradesh." Raza has translated this concept onto canvas in a variety of ways. He seems to be holding his canvas captive inside a border. The canvas is often divided into four or eight segments when the central orb of the bindu does not hold it together. In the film, we see Raza looking lovingly at a series of four *Bindu*

paintings at a Festival of India exhibition. Here there is progression from utter darkness (in the first canvas) to glowing red light (in the fourth and last).

Using the large dark bindu, Raza has painted an impressive work called *Maa* (1981). It bears the touching legend in Hindi: "Mother, when I return, what shall I bring back?" I find it a commentary on Raza's own journey home, and his incurable nostalgia - not for the past but for his own homeland.

And finally, there is the magnificent burst of expressionist canvases - landscapes in essence and clothed in all the mystery and colour that Raza inimitably invests his work with - which he has exhibited here during the past few years. These paintings include *The White Flower* (1983), *Rajasthan*, *Saurashtra* and *Saurashtra*, all made in the period 1983-84. In these and other paintings, Raza feely exploits certain geometrical patterns but without spoiling the vibrant quality of his poetic design.

In Raza's personality and work there is a fund of spirituality which he has preserved through all his sensuous communion with nature. His greatness lies in the fact that he can dwell equally effortlessly in the jungles of the Gonds or the sands of Rajasthan as on the mounts of Parnassus where they try to solve the difficult riddles of oriental mysticism.



Courtesy: Raza