

ART

# A 'bindu' for Gandhi

PHOTO: SAUL/ART

**At 92, SH Raza remains one of the finest colourists among contemporary Indian artists**

By **SOMAK GHOSHAL**  
somak.g@liveinmint.com

**S**yed Haider Raza was a boy of 7 or 8 when Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi visited Mandla, the district in Madhya Pradesh where Raza was born. "I remember his car passing by our house, but I did not manage to catch sight of him," says the artist, who turned 92 last week.

Along the years, the memory evolved into an abiding interest in Gandhi's life and philosophy, which started entering the world of Raza's paintings through broken sentences and crumbling forms. His latest show, *Parikrama—Around Gandhi*, currently on at the Vadehra Art Gallery in New Delhi, brings together his meditations on the Mahatma since 2010, the year Raza moved back to India from Paris, France, after almost 60 years.

At a glance, the series, made of a handful of large acrylics, is replete with echoes of Raza's signature style: the dizzy spirals converging in the iconic *bindu*, the motif he made uniquely his own; abstract geometric shapes; and sporadic words in Hindi, appearing like half-uttered murmurings on the surface of the canvas. But a closer inspection reveals a steady departure from the intense colours associated with the artist, towards more muted shades of grey and brown.

Perhaps the most haunting composition in the series is *Hey Ram*, an abstract representation of Gandhi's final moments as he lay dying after being shot by Nathuram Godse. The title alludes to the last words attributed to Gandhi, inscribed against a smoky background of leaden colours in the Devanagari script. A darker earthen hue bleeds into the frame from one corner. The juxtaposition conveys, insidiously but subtly, a mood of mortality and violence.

"All my life I have been affected by the power of this phrase," says Raza, referring to Gandhi's final exclamation. Bound to a wheelchair, sipping at a glass of wine, he claims to work every day, health permitting. "After my return to India, I started reading Gandhi's writings on *satyagraha* and *ahimsa* once again."

The word *shanti* (peace) appears on another work, a hypnotic cluster of concentric circles culminating in a black dot. "Looking at Raza at work is like watching a composer conducting an orchestra," says Arun Vadehra, managing director of the gallery, who has known the artist for over 25 years. "You are captivated by the rhythm of his colours. You can see them dance and hear their stillness in his paintings."

Raza went to Europe in the 1950s, along with several of his contemporaries who formed the Progressive Artists' Group in Bombay (now Mumbai), to study art. "I felt I must know what makes a painting good or bad," he says. "But in my heart, I was deeply attached to Indian thought through-



out my years in Paris." Having studied with teachers who were mostly Hindu Brahmins in India, Raza continued to read the epics and classical texts, especially the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Ramayan*, and kept going back to the writings of thinkers like Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave.

The long years of exile also exposed him to the cosmopolitan spirit of European modernism, which informed the legacies of the best minds of his generation—M.F. Husain, Francis Newton Souza, V.S. Gaitonde, Tyeb Mehta and Akbar Padamsee, among others. The second volume of Raza's letters to, and from, his artist friends, published in conjunction with the show, is a rich archive for those curious about the ideas and influences that defined the work of his contemporaries, all of whom went on to become global ambassadors of Indian art.

The title of this collection, *Geysers*, edited by cultural critic Ashok Vajpeyi, takes a gentle dig at these eminent artists who changed the course of Indian modernism. The exchanges are personal and idiosyncratic, dwelling chiefly on the difficulty of living abroad on frugal incomes made from the occasional sale of a painting or two. "In those years we sold paintings for a few hundred rupees," recalls Raza, whose work currently fetches several lakhs to over a crore in the market. "What mattered to us was the esteem we were given."

The recognition was not easily attained. In several of his letters, Souza acknowledges the Olympian shadow cast by Pablo Picasso over the artistic community in 1950s Europe. "One small scrap of a drawing by Picasso was priced at £240, and next door, I saw an automobile firm selling a new car for £200," he writes in shock from London in 1949 after a visit to St George's gallery.

Not just in terms of market economics, the Spanish master also posed a steep aesthetic challenge to these pioneers of modernism in India, forcing them to find ways of escaping the thrall of his sublime imagination. A mini exhibition of lithographs, etchings and drawings by Picasso and Salvador Dali (another towering figure of European

**Lessons of the master:** S.H. Raza continues to read, write and paint almost every day.

art), on at the upper level of the gallery, gives the viewer a glimpse of their enduring influence.

*Parikrama—Around Gandhi is on till 26 March, 11am-7pm (Sundays closed), at Vadehra Art Gallery, D-40, Defence Colony, New Delhi (24622545).*

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