

SAYED HAIDER RAZA

a monograph for

Lalit Kala Akademi

By Dr. Geeti Sen

There is a central image which becomes indispensable and the main preoccupation in the work of an artist, over many long years.

Sayed Haider Raza was introduced to the idea of the Bindu as a focal point of meditation when he was a young boy of eight, in his native village of Kakaiya in Madhya Pradesh. It was a means by which his restless and roving young mind was made to concentrate on a single point; but the exercise did much more than that. For him it became a moment of initiation\_\_ towards bringing order into a visual world that was rich with nuances, filled with mysteries and the excitement of discovery.

The dense forests of Madhya Pradesh became the feeding ground for his volatile imagination: dark, hostile forces at night, the quickening beat of Gond drums and the flickering flames of torchlight, the reassurance of light at daybreak and the radiant colours of the market place... Most of all, the obsessive, dominating power of the scorching sun in central India, and the resurgence of life and humanity along the sacred waters of the Narmada.

These became hallucinating images, embedded as a tenacious memory of his childhood years \_\_ images to which he has returned again and again for enrichment. Memory plays a strange and fascinating role, in that it feeds on images of the past and intensifies the experience for us \_\_ all the more so if we are separated by time and place. Although Raza was to leave India in 1950 to settle in France, his paintings speak out fragments of his past, vivified on canvas with a sensibility and colour that is essentially Indian. In a sense, it is as though he has never left the country of his origins.

It was providential that Raza spent his youth close to the soil, in the heart of India, in communion, as it were, with the elements. This developed in him an intuitive understanding of a higher reality.

Nature has remained for him a pictorial metaphor. The forest, the mountains, the river. The sun exploding with energy and vibrations, dominating the landscape. These are compelling forces, creating a timeless zone. The Elements become magnetic, as the only forces to control this world and to bring us closer to a sense of harmony and visual order.

Raza retained these perceptions through his schooling at Kakaiya and Damoh, then through his art training at Nagpur and Bombay, and his travels abroad to study at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. Twenty years later, when the Bindu surfaced in his paintings, it was with tremendous force and clarity. As the brilliant Black Sun (1953), scorching the houses scattered in mud ochre; dominating the vast landscape of The Earth and vestiges of humanity in Ma (1981) spinning out concentric circles of energy as Bindu (1986), and by bringing colour to earth as Sourya (1986).

In Raza's pictures over the past three decades, there have been endless variations on this theme. There can be no apology for repetition. The artist refers us to the ritual incantation of japa, used both in Hinduism and in Islam, where the repetition of certain syllables leads to total concentration. Likewise, the resonance of a single visual form leads to ever-richer dimensions.

To use an analogy from music: Darbari raga is played out by a great musician. Several months later, when he returns to this raga, the validity of his performance depends upon on improvisations introduced into the same raga. Creativity exists not in finding something that is entirely new, but in delving deeper into the origins of ourselves, and what we have truly known and experienced.

Raga derives from the sanskrit root ranjh, which means to "colour" the mind. The ragamala paintings are poetic allusions or metaphors of musical melodies. North Indian music and Hindi poetry, both, have been for Raza a continuing source of delight and nourishment. He



exclaims:

What is raga ? It is a certain melody  
which colours the heart of man.  
Colour in Indian art is ecstasy!

The raga and the ragamala have contributed in a very explicit way to the fabric of his pictures. If we consider works such as Rajasthan and Saurashtra, and even the poetic allusion to his country entitled "Ma", the references are all too clear. As in the so-called "primitive" schools of early Rajput painting, the bold use of blood-red and intense black with white interspaces suggest both purity and passion, poetry and violence. The definitive touch is added by the use of strong black borders to frame the image; as though we are removed from it in time, and looking upon an icon.

Yet these canvases are related to the texture and rhythm of his own life. For six months of the summer and autumn, Raza and his wife Janine live in Gorbio, a twelfth-century village situated in the mountains, at a distance of seven kilometres from the sea. Within the house that is built of rugged stone, pewter candlesticks and dark wood opening into secret closets blend with the glow and magic of Indian textiles. A Mary Magdalene from Goa reclines over the fireplace. Sacred mementos, that recall in their vibrancy certain fragments of these paintings.

## II

The painting entitled "Ma" summons up the last vestiges of gestural expression to be seen in Raza's work. Pictures of the '70's such as La Forge represent this exploratory stage, conjuring up in their depths the forbidding forests of Madhya Pradesh. These canvases are intuitive, restless, assertions of the brush, still searching for a leitmotif. In 1978 the Bindu reappears as a central force, radiating energy, an epicentre of encompassing space, or suspended between two square areas of dark and light.

In his statement at the Visual Arts East-West Encounter, held in Bombay in 1985, Raza suggests the reasons as to how and why he returns to indigenous sources for inspiration.

Rajput and Jain painting appeared more vital than the prestigious Moghul 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 of colour orchestration. The indigenous imitations of European realism seemed to us dull and unconvincing, even when the themes were religious....

(Italics mine)

My present work is the result of two parallel enquiries. Firstly, it aimed at pure plastic order, form-order. Secondly, it concerns the theme of Nature. Both have converged into a single point and become inseparable. The point, the bindu, symbolises the seed bearing the potential of all life, in a sense. It's also a visible form containing all the essential requirements of line, tone, colour, texture and space. The black space is charged with latent forces aspiring for fulfilment.

It is of importance to describe the actual process of work in a painting such as Bindu (1988). Earlier photographs show concentric circles in bold, defined colours, radiating outwards from an intense black epicentre, to tones of ochres, chrome-yellow, greens, blues, orange and red, to an intense blue at the rim of the wheel. Yet in the final work when completed, these bold colours have been overpainted to a more subdued palette — with the purpose of the colours vibrating through, as latent forces of energy.

In another series of Bindus, Raza uses the logic of colour, moving from the darkest to the palest of tones in the colour spectrum. In yet another painting of white circles on black space, he inscribes a well-known verse from the poet Muktibodh; ~~which~~ <sup>this</sup> sums up his philosophy on colour as originating from the dark void, and aspiring to ever-greater brilliance:

from this black void (shunya)  
floats (emerges) the perception/ awareness  
of the world.



The central preoccupation of the Bindu may have led to the interpretation of Raza's work as being neo-tantric. IN 1983 March he was invited by the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, to participate and include his pictures in an exhibition on the Neo-Tantric. His position on this was unequivocal and unyielding, as stated in his response to the Director in a letter. He writes:

My using a "circle" or a "square" as key motifs do not make my paintings tantric, even if I have called them "Bindu", "SOurya" or "Zamine". I am aware, Tantric Darshan is far too complex. I know little about its beliefs or rituals. My involvement in work is essentially with the life of form, and all my efforts are directed towards a coherent pictorial logic. As a result, my paintings are intrinsically very different, both in approach and conception, from the mass of work done in INdia or e3sewhere, as a revival of TANtric art.

(Italics mine)

Raza's religiousity of temperament combines with an exacting nature, with the search for precision and meticulousness in his work \_\_ as indeed, in all aspects of his life. In an interview published in the India International Centre Quarterly (December 1985), he suggests that it is his years of training in France which influenced this preoccupation with formal order: with the precise geometry of the circle, the square and the triangle.

It would be all too easy for us to misconstrue this statement, to lead us to the belief that his approach is that of a formalist or a structuralist, or even that of a neo-tantric. Nothing could be further from the truth. At each stage of the painting, Raza is open to the rich, innumerable possibilities of variation, and of improvisation. Although his images do not belong to a world of experiential reality, he is intensely aware of his surroundings, and again, passionately involved with every detail of life.

\*

## III

Gorbio, where Raza and Janine live for the summer months, is situated at a distance of some seven kilometres from the intense blue sea of the Cote d'Azur. The village with its cobbled streets and stone arches dates from the twelfth century. Every morning, on his way to the studio, Raza looks in at a church that is rarely visited. Ten minutes of quiet meditation. For him it hardly matters this is a church or a mosque or a temple. The resulting solitude, the quietening of the mind, yields the same effect which he had been taught as a boy in his village of Kakaiya in Madhya Pradesh. To empty the mind of all previous preoccupations, to focus upon a single intent. With this spirit of inner composure, he begins work on his canvases.

In the garden of Raza's studio there grows an ancient olive tree, as a pivotal point in the centre. Two other olive trees have been planted, a cherry tree, a plum tree and a fig tree; and a border of small poplars to bring privacy into the garden. A grove of bamboo stalks rise against the hillside, and mimosa with tiny yellow blossoms. Every plant is watered and nurtured, each day. Deep red begonias and pink petunias, and purple lavender. Bana, the black cat, lies asleep in the sun on the broken white stones of the patio. Raza, surrounded by these animate forms, works on an easel.

These details are not insignificant; for they compose the environment to which he is susceptible. For him every form possesses meaning; even the stones in his garden are a metaphor. The process of observation and assimilation goes on, even if one is not looking directly at nature. Raza comments: "I want to see with my eyes closed..." What he sees is a metaphor of the life he knows.

In sun and light and open air, it is not difficult to see why colours have a luminous quality, so vividly realised in his paintings. There is poetry in the tendrils of green shoots, passion in red flowers. There is magic in the evening air at Gorbio, when the full moon slips out



from behind the mountain glowing a hot orange, then melting in the darkness into silver white. These are tangible realities. The optics of colour combine to produce a single lucid image on the canvas.

Two years ago Raza found an image in stone that crystallised for him the essential form which he had been seeking. Shaped rather like a key and inscribed with an inner circle, it resembled the innumerable yonis that are found along the ghats of the river Narmada. He treasured this stone, placed it at the entrance to his studio, filled it with earth and planted seeds... Each spring, tiny shoots of grass grew up in this circumscribed space, fertilised by the sun.

This image and idea becomes fundamental to his new phase of work, a series entitled ANKURAM or Germination. Transmuted from stone into canvas and colour, it is the new leit-motiv, energising one canvas after another. In an inspired moment it is possible to see suddenly how the sun, the sole source of light and energy on earth, fertilises the earth and germinates it, to bring life into plants.

In a moment of near-revelation, the Bindu, the seed, which has been a constant and recurrent image in Raza's pictures over the past ten or twelve years, gives birth now to life. This is Genesis. Moving from darkness into light, the central orb radiates energy, exploding into a thousand radiant forms and the myriad colours of the rainbow.

At times now, the focus is drawn entirely to plants abstracted; to the vertical trunk of a tree tranching out into sharp diagonals; or else to a forest of plants, of superimposed triangles descending into the fertile earth. The colour harmonies are a resonant vibration of reds, greens and blues. Occasionally, the presence of the Bindu reminds us of the germinating power of the seed.

There is no doubt that Raza's paintings are abstractions, with a meditative quality about them. But with a sensibility that bespeaks his Indian origins, these forms and colours are imbued with an inner life; with a vibrancy which relates them to the tangible world of his reality.

\* \* \*

G. S. S.