ESTABLISHED 1838
THE TIMES OF INDIA

Sunday Review

"I hate the label 'superstar'"

The Amitabh Bachchan phenomenon could have been created only by Hindi cinema. Perhaps no actor has commanded as much public adulation as he. His earnings are said to be astronomical; he is the pet target of gossip columnists; every film of his arouses something close to mass hysteria. What makes this "superstar" click? He supplies some of the answers himself in an exclusive interview.

by Khalid Mohamed

I MET Amitabh Bachchan last week at the Bangalore railway station, which had been converted into a virtual studio for the shooting of Manmohan Desai's latest opus, **Coolie.**

Action scenes were being picturised. He jumped from the compartment of a train onto a mattress placed below for his safe landing. He simulated sounds of pain. A stuntsman waited to do the more death-defying scenes but that didn't prevent the actor from being hit so hard in the stomach by the villain that he ended up in hospital a few days later.

At lunch-time, Amitabh Bachchan had never looked up from his vegetarian meal. A swift change of mood came over him when the break was over. He cracked sailor jokes before delivering some more of those famous punches straight into the eye of the camera.

My conversation with him continued in a hotel cottage where the actor retreated every evening after "pack-up". He would closet himself inside and play music on futuristic-looking electronic equipment. The only interruption was a team of officials from All India Radio who wanted him to read Nehru's will for a foreign broadcast. He agreed readily, though he did point out that his voice had been rejected as "unsuitable" when he had once applied for the post of an A.I.R. newsreader. Ironic laughter fol-

40,000 people. I don't know how I pulled it off.

When I was young, I was attracted by Hindi cinema. There were Dilip Kumar, Waheedaji, Meenaji and Shammi Kapoor whom I admired. I thought Guru Dutt's **Kaagaz ke Phool** was a masterpiece and couldn't fathom why people couldn't understand it. I saw it when I was just out of school and I'd go to it repeatedly. It's like Chaplin's **Limelight** which can be watched and talked about forever.

After over 12 years in the industry would you say you have an acting style of your own?

It's not right to say that I have a style. A style is possible only if it is vastly imitated. I don't know, is it? May be an expression or two is borrowed but no one goes through the entire gamut. My aim has been to be natural, that's all. I've been doing everything, really. Once **Anand** clicked, they wanted me to keep wearing dhotis. Then I tried something different in **Bombay to Goa,** after that in **Zanjeer** and **Amar Akbar Anthony.**

I'm flexible, the trouble is no one comes to me with new ideas.

But would you work in the small-budget films? Besides, would the "different" film-makers be able to afford you?

I've seen quite a few of the offbeat films and thought they were marvellous. I saw **Sparsh** and thought both Shabana Azmi and Naseerudin Shah were brilliant. I'd like to work in them also but I don't get the offers. No.

What makes a person think he can be an actor? Is there an instinct?

There has to be an instinct. As far back as I can remember, I was on stage, acted before the mirror in the bathroom, behind the closet. I suppose this naturally found an outlet in cinema.

I was shy. I still am, and used to withdraw into myself. But when I'd go on stage, there would be a tremendous transformation. I can't explain but this still happens before the camera. I'm scared of facing people, crowds, restaurants. When I came to Bombay and found actors sometimes had to perform on the streets, I thought I'd die if they made me go through such stuff. This demon of fear is still there in me. I'm petrified of doing song and dance sequences. People tend to laugh at this, attribute it to my modesty but they don't know I go through hell. For **Yaarana**, I danced in a stadium packed with

with any of my producers. Quite frankly, it's not the price of the actor that matters — you pay the guy what you are going to recover from the market.

Small-budget films are fine. But at the same time, the dictates of the masses cannot be overlooked.

But can't public tastes be improved in relation to Hindi cinema?

This business of improving audience tastes is a vicious circle. Cinema can be used as a tool for education. But if we divert the purpose of films away from entertainment something significant will be lost. And who says Hindi cinema doesn't impart a certain kind of education? They state that crime doesn't pay, that rape is wrong, that you cannot get away with murder. If the day comes when people stop liking such cinema, then it would improve — there would be many more **Sparshes**, fewer **Amar Akbar Anthonys**.

You are credited with popularising the anti-hero, of making the audience aware of the anger within all of us.

The credit should go to scriptwriters Salim-Javed. They conceived the character for **Zanjeer**, I was just the performer. If people liked it, it was because all of us want to revolt and defy the norm. After that, people wanted to cash in, that's how the character kept coming again and again.

The **Zanjeer** part wasn't difficult to play. I haven't made strong efforts at my roles really, which doesn't mean I don't work on them at all. **Deewar** too, was a foolproof script. Any actor doing these two films would have been equally successful.

After them, you started playing the rough man-of-the-street, someone whom the audience could relate to immediately.

This came to my notice as late as **Muqaddar ka Sikandar**. I started reading a few perceptive write-ups. I wasn't playing these characters, they just happened. I hesitate to do my own analysis. It should be done by my observers. These are the roles that have been offered to me, that's all. I never discuss a script with Manmohan Desai or Prakash Mehra and you could claim that they are two people who have continuously given me very earthy roles apart from the ones Salim-Javed once wrote. I have never told them this is what I want to do or this is what I want to propagate. I'm just a duty-bound, well-paid clerk. I go to the sets, do what I'm told. Whatever I have done has come straight off-the-cuff.

Like the part of "... **Anthony**". I never knew the language he had to speak. I had only heard unit members of Manmohan Desai and, to some extent, the director himself using that Bombay-Christian lingo. I must admit that initially I had problems but as the shooting went on, I became comfortable. The Anglo-Indians I had come into contact with in U.P. didn't speak like that at all.

Do you get any creative satisfaction out of such experiences?

Definitely, if you like to call it creative because generally creativity and commercial cinema — how I hate the use of words such as "commercial" — do not jell, according to our critics. There's a lot of hard labour, sweat and blood that goes into our cinema. The fact is we do have our moments of creativity.

I was reading a review of the latest summer releases in America in **Time** magazine. Some of the top analysts there who must be respected because they make 100 million dollars in 25 days—which is some business — feel that a film with a sequel has come to stay. A sequel is a paying proposition rather than something new which may fall flat on its face. There was the trend-setting **Godfather-II**, the **Airport** series, **Rocky, Superman, The Empire Strikes Back.** They repeat the same thing in a different garb. If they're getting away with it, why are we criticised for doing the same kind of films with the same stories?

If an actor's repeating himself all the while and still with the crowds, why should he stop? Why do you want him to go off the beaten track?

Are you talking about yourself?

I'm just trying to defend myself. I know I'm not getting very far. It's not that I'm only working in one kind of cinema. There's always a Hrishikesh Mukherjee film on the board.

There are stock routines I have to perform. I do feel like resisting them often but, eventually, I succumb. I also look on it as a chal-

(Continued on Page VII)

DOES HE GLAMORISE VIOLENCE? The answer: "I'm not showing them violence but valour. I am teaching the audience that injustice can be fought." With Shashi Kapoor in a still from Do Aur Do Paanch.

"We'll never send our children to the mills"

Of the two-and-a-half lakh textile workers who have been on strike in Bombay for over six months, at least half have gone back to their villages in Maharashtra, mainly in Ratnagiri, Kolhapur, Satara and Pune districts.

Rajiv Tiwari travelled through these areas to be able to talk to some of these workers and to get to know their feelings. He reports.

WE are far away from Bombay travelling by bus through rural Maharashtra. The road during most of our journey is nearly **kachcha** and we cannot believe that we are maintaining an average speed of fifteen kilometres an hour from Kolhapur towards a village in the Konkan called Karool. The tiredness of the journey is compensated for by the scenic beauty of the countryside that has turned green in the first flush of rain. At other times, these hilly rocky parts are generally a burnt brown. Our route takes us into the very heart of the Sahyadri mountains and passes by a little hamlet, nestling high on the range called Ganganbavda—the sky mountain.

Now, we seem to have plunged into the ghats and before I know it the bus takes a sharp turn, the driver moves into a low gear and below me, way down there, and all round us, the Konkan stretches out, its greeness gently and deceptively alluring in its abundant fertility. Ganganbavda divides the land of the Konkan which runs like a narrow sliver thickly studded with emerald from Ratnagiri up to and a little beyond the border of Goa. The other side of the Sahyadri, which stand like the Great Divide, is Desh, which comprises parts of Pune and Kolaba, Satara and Kolhapur, Sangli... It is from these areas that nearly 60 per cent of Bombay's mill workers come.

As we descend towards Karool which is merely a speck deep below in the valley, it is possible to know why. On this side of the Sahyadri, the terrain is harsh, dotted by stumpy hillocks and provides little sustenance to its inhabitants. It is totally dependent on the rains. Though water is plentiful during a good monsoon, it does not last all the year round and it is enough only for one crop in a year.

Desh, which lies behind the Sahyadri is not much better off. However, the terrain being a tableland is easier to cultivate though it, too, like the Konkan can grow only one crop. Altogether in both these regions the economy is one of subsistence level farming for the millions of peasants in these areas.

Because of fragmentation of holdings over the years the average land ownership in Konkan and much of Desh seldom exceeds five acres per family of 10—15 members. In the case of most mill workers, their holdings are as small as anything between 3 to one acres and this is the main reason for the emigration to Bombay.

"We have no choice but to face the hardship. Do you ever get anything without trouble or strife?"

They leave behind their fields and thatched huts to live and work in crowded, filthy Bombay. They leave their ancestral homes to do eight hours of back-breaking work every day, in appalling conditions, to share a **kholi** with thirty other workers in the grim squalor of the chawls. Given the choice they would rather stay at home, but that option has been denied to them.

As I continue my bus journey, I see the lush landscape giving way to stretches of ploughed field. We are below in the valley and Karool looms up. I get off the bus and head for the small teashop where I find that my "contact" has gone out. No one knows when he will be back.

I wait and soon find myself talking to the group of people. Yes, of course there are mill workers who have come back to the village. "I am a **girni kamgar**," says one. "Me too", says another. "There are at least 150 of us here..." "and many more in Bombay who cannot come back". "Altogether there must be 500-600 from this village. "It looks small but there are seven **wadis** with nearly 3,500 people." "...and as many more in Bombay."

We keep talking and the men leave to work towards wherever their fields lie and I am left with Kashiram Kadam. Kadam, who is 25 years old, doesn't work in any mill, but is back from Bombay on leave from his dyes factory to look after his ailing parents. The village school is just across a small compound and pointing to it Kadam says, "That is the seventh standard class being held there. All those boys will soon leave for Bombay, after completing their seventh or eighth. I left after my seventh when my shirt and shorts were in tatters and when we had no money for school and little to eat."

The story is the same everywhere I think as our bus begins the grinding climb over the ghats I had crossed only a few hours ago. If it is bad in the Konkan it is only fractionally better in Desh, where nearly every mill worker has some land to come back to and knows he won't face abject starvation. In the Konkan, however, this bond with the village has been severed for nearly half the working population in Bombay. They can never come back to stay in the village since there is no land to live off.

Yet Desh has been affected by the inroads made by the cultivation of commercial crops like sugarcane, cotton and tobacco. This, however, did not begin yester-year but way back in the early 'twenties and 'thirties, leaving in its wake the phenomenon of the landless peasant, or the small and marginal farmer, and the development of a rural proletariat.

Take, for instance, the experience of the village Bamangarh in Bhor. Around 1915-1928 a massive dam was constructed to provide water not to Bhor, but to the rich sugarcane farmers of Solapur. Bamangarh lay in the tract that was to become the catchment area and was thus shifted up into the hills. The rocky and stony terrain was theirs for keeps but what Bamangarh had lost was the flats down below. Cultivation was not easy even in 1930 and the first few villagers left every six months to sell kulfis in Bombay or to work in the Trombay salt works. Today, the third generation is working in the mills of Bombay.

"Why do you think a man poisons himself? Out of desperation, no? For nine years we have been troubled. Now no more of that nonsense."

Consider what will happen to Degaon village which is now on the verge of becoming an industrial suburb of Satara. The villagers already know it. They say that in another fifteen years they will lose their lands. What after that? Only Habbal in Kolhapur district remains unravaged in this matter, enconsced at a great distance from Kolhapur, and yet it has nearly 100—150 of its villagers in the mills of Bombay. "Who can cultivate this land without water?" they ask me.

During the course of my tour, through the districts and villages, I interviewed nearly sixty or more mill workers and met many more who were home on strike. Presented below are the feelings elicited from them. These may not be factual but they are certainly more eloquent.

* * *

"I came to my village two days after we struck work. We all did. We knew it was going to be a long strike. Only those who are engaged in active union work or those who have no land have not left Bombay.

"Here in the village we at least manage one square meal a day and we have our house and family. We own a little bit of land even if it is rocky and parched without any water.

"No no, it is not an easy life for all of us ... workers and our families. Now we have no choice but to face the hardship. Do you ever get anything without trouble or strife?

"We are poor peasants. Trouble is nothing new to us.

"First we used to eat four **bhakris**, now we eat two, but the strike must go on.

"My father used to go to Bombay for four months a year to sell kulfi. Now I go. We have to go to Bombay or Pune for 10 months every year. We are all service people.

"But we leave our families behind in the village. Where will they stay in Bombay? Who has the money for a single **kholi** even in a far-away suburb like Vikhroli? And school fees in Bombay are Rs. 25.

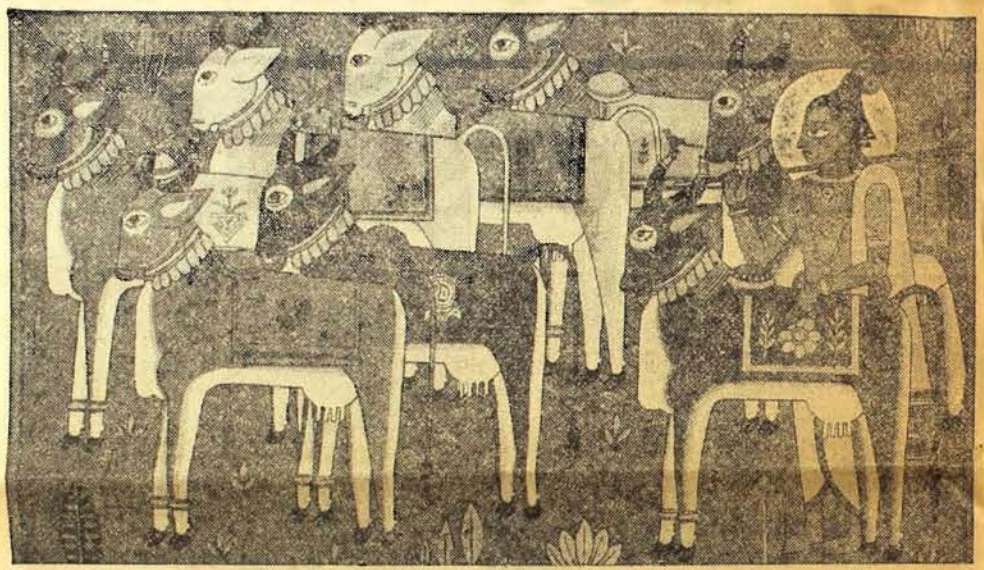
"When I went to Bombay thirty years ago, I was the first man from my village to work in the mills. The rest of us, not many, sold kulfis or did **mathadi** work.

"Most of us from Bamangarh work in the same mill—Sreeniwas. We work and live together. Then we call more people from the village for **bharti** in the mill.

"From Degaon, we are the first generation in the mill. A few men have worked in Bombay before but they don't number more than 20. We are at present 400 and are employed mainly in National and Bombay Dyeing. Then there must be at least 600 more in the BEST, the police and the army. It's a big village, there

(Continued on Page VII)

ESTABLISHED 1838



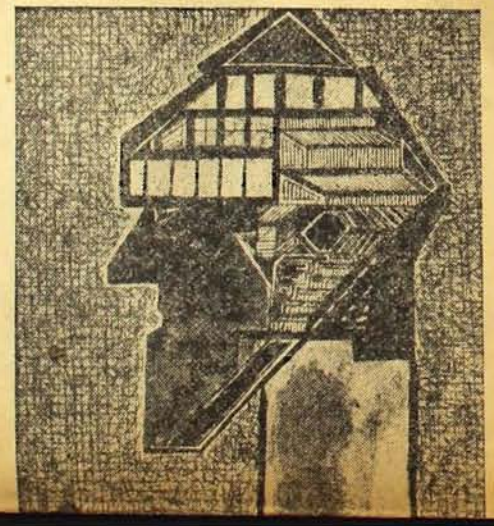
IN THE JAMINI ROY TRADITION: A painting depicting Gopal and his cows by K. S. Mangalsinhji. Courtesy: The Times of India Annual 1953.

Is This The Painting Of A Cow?

Once Dr. Verrier Elwin showed a Jamini Roy cow to a Baiga tribal boy and asked him whether he liked it. The little one said, "I don't understand it." Dr. Elwin persisted. "It is the painting of a cow," he exclaimed. To which the Baiga boy's reply was, "Is it?"

by A. S. Raman

TO revert to the Bengal School briefly. Though it stood for Orientalism in art, its emphasis was on **Indianness** which gradually acquired strident chauvinist overtones. It sought to Indianise the modern idiom by restating the ideals and



primitivism was as superficial and and pretentious as the Bengal School's classicism, because he had nothing to add to what the village craftsmen had to say. In spite of his childlike innocence, fine taste, flawless technique and deep insight into the Indian lore, he failed to evolve a visual language which was intellectually as provocative as it was technically impeccable. But apparently he preferred the security provided by commercial success to the hazards inherent in aesthetic investigations. He used to refer proudly to his studio as 'a factory'. He confessed that the size and colour schemes of his paintings varied with the prices offered. The tragedy of his art lay in its unemotional, unexciting precision and primness. George Keyt used to describe his paintings as 'carbon copies of Bengali folk art.'

Under the inspiration of Jamini Roy, however, intensely creative reinterpretations of regional folk art traditions and forms became the passionate pursuit of young artists. Somehow the success achieved by the Andhra artists in this genre seemed much more significant than that of the others. Artists such as A. Paidi Raju, K. Rajiah, P. L. Narasimhamurthi, K. Sreenivasulu, M. Rajaji, M. Reddappa Naidu and many others went beyond a mere rehash of folk art and produced paintings with a character and identity. Today M. F. Husain, Bhupen Khak-

Pop Goes The Easel

The collectors, who purchased art as an "investment" and in that way contributed to the art boom, have all but vanished from the scene.

by Michael Brenson

THE twenty-year boom of the New York art world, when there seemed to be a buyer for the work of every artist and when dealers and auction houses broke their sales records virtually every month, is apparently over.

Galleries report seeing fewer customers, showing fewer artists and selling fewer works. Because business has slowed and purchasers are taking longer to pay for what they buy, some dealers are for the first time talking about charging interest on long-term payments.

A few dealers and some artists, of course, continue to thrive. Many old master paintings, Cezannes, Picassos and the work of established artists continue to hold their value and indeed set sales records.

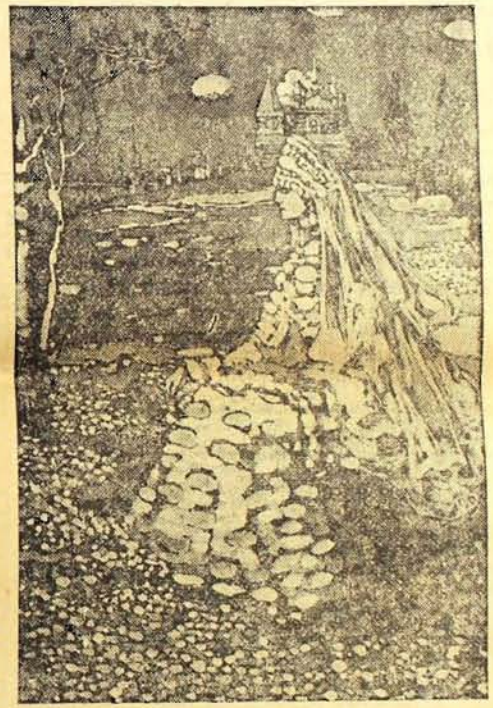
The collectors who purchased art as an "investment" and in that way contributed to the art boom, have all but vanished from the scene.

The decline in the art market parallels the setback suffered by Sotheby's, the auction house, whose success was a barometer of the prosperity of the art world. A 25 per cent drop from the 1980-81 record of $ 610 million in sales recently forced Sotheby's to abandon its elegant Madison Avenue showrooms and headquarters.

Christie's, the chief rival of Sotheby's, has also reported a drop of 10 to 15 per cent from its $320-million sales in the previous year.

Paul Shanley, publisher of the monthly magazine **Art in America** says there has been a sudden decrease in U. S. gallery advertising, which his magazine has had to make up for by soliciting ads from European dealers.

Those who trade in art are not the only ones affected by the decline. Artists who do not have a strong following are sure to suffer. Many dealers explain they can no longer show the work of commercially unsuccessful artists.



RUSSIAN BEAUTY IN A LANDSCAPE: A painting by Wassily Kandinsky.

year for her Paris gallery, a block from the Pompidou Center, is being asked to pay $120,000 a-year rent for her 57th street gallery in New York.

Sylvan Cole, director of Associated American Artists, believes the art gallery in its present form in the United States is being thrown into question. He feels the "public commercial gallery" has become so complex and expensive — with its costs, advertising and staff — that he wonders if "the whole system of art dealing is not going to change."

Meanwhile, many well-established dealers and galleries which have in their collections the work of critically and financially successful artists, see another side to the picture.

Nathan Kolodner of Emmerich, which includes in its stable Helen Frankenthaler and Anthony Caro,

In a period of tight money, people want what they feel they can be sure of. Cassatt, Kandinsky, Stella and Louis are among the 19th-and 20th-century artists whose work was auctioned off at record prices during the 1981-82 fiscal year. There are waiting lists for big name younger artists like Julian Schnabel and Jonathan Borofsky in SoHo galleries.

One of the few things everyone in the art world seems to agree on is that the economic situation has made every part of the art world more selective. With the galleries and auction houses, being more selective means being more careful about what is accepted and what is put up for sale. With collectors it means buying more slowly and trying to be as sure as possible about what is bought. This explains why the middle and lower ranges of the New York market have

values of the remote past. It, however, did not respond to folk art as enthusiastically as Jamini Roy did. It had been closely associated with the prestigious Indian Society of Oriental Art of which the most active promoters were Abanindranath Tagore, Dr. Stella Kramrisch and O.C. Ganguly.

The Bengal School functioned more or less as the cultural wing of the Indian National Congress. In fact every one thought there could be no Indian art outside of the Bengal School. Though it had its origin in Calcutta, it soon took root in Santiniketan which gradually become the Mecca of Indian artists. In fairness to the Bengal School one must say that among its exponents were some outstanding artists with imagination, sensibility and judgment, though the scope for originality under its rigid discipline was limited. For example, masters of the stature of Nandalal Bose, Benode Bihari Mukherjee, Deviprasad Roy Chowdhuri, the Dey brothers — Mukul and Manish—and several others found themselves emotionally in tune with its aims and objectives.

HUMANISM IN VISUAL SHORTHAND: A painting by Rabindranath Tagore.

What was the impact of the Bengal School on Western India? Bombay remained unimpressed. There has always been healthy rivalry between Bombay and Calcutta. With the impetus provided by the Parsi collectors, the Tatas, the Wadias, the Nicholsons, the Jehangirs, the Godrejs and the Bhabhas—and the European mentors, i.e., the Gerards, the Laydens, the Schlesingers and the Langhammers, the Bombay artists decided to express themselves in a pseudo-Western style in preference to pseudo-Oriental mannerisms. The sleepy All India Association of Fine Arts under the absentee leadership of the Bangalore-based G. Venkatachalam, an infectiously genial and hilariously confused windbag, was supposed to be Bombay's answer to Delhi's aggressive All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society under the dynamic stewardship of Barada Ukil, and Calcutta's tidy and compact Indian Academy of Fine Arts under the matronly care of Lady Ranu Mukherjee. But the Bombay artists clearly had no use for the AIAFA. They worked as individuals, supplying what affluent patrons and influential mentors demanded. The result was that still lives, portraits and landscapes, combining the realism of the West and the romanticism of the East, acquired a new prestige.

RABINDRANATH TAGORE: A painting by Abanindranath Tagore.

Waited In The Wings

The future trend-setters still waited in the wings. Their overstated abstracts and expressionist and surrealist effusions were not in sight yet. I have always felt—and this is my personal view—that the modernism of the artists working in Calcutta is more Indian and durable than that of the Bombay-based ones because of the latter's highly accentuated international profile. Both spiritually and aesthetically Calcutta belongs to Bengal more integrally than Bombay to Maharashtra. Both Bombay and Calcutta are cosmopolitan with a high degree of professionalism in every field. Both are primarily centres of trade and industry. But the tragedy is that Bombay's commercialism is not only elegant but efficient and naturally it is more corrosive to creativity than Calcutta's languid casualness.

What about the north? The consistently energetic Delhi-based All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, under the crusading leadership of Barada Ukil, became the rallying point of all the Bengal School artists who lived and worked in the north. He had an easy time, till a serious challenge came from the Delhi Silpi Chakra, a dedicated group of artists with a flair for modernism which at once had piquance and purposefulness. The All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society's effort to consolidate the gains of the Bengal School received an irreversible setback with the emergence of this vigorous group which comprised predominantly young Punjabi artists under the guidance of a Lahore-based Bengali, Bhabesh Sanyal. Adversity in the form of Partition brought them all together. They suddenly became aware of a shared identity and philosophy.

Jamini Roy, who had always remained a superb craftsman but without involvement in any self-consciously directed art movement, decided to paint in a manner that came naturally to him, a manner free of the inanities of the revivalists and the irrelevances of the modernists. He wanted to be simple, spontaneous and thoroughly Indian. Actually it was men in uniform who did the early image-building for him in the early years of the Second World War. Stationed in Calcutta at the time, the British and American soldiers were the "art critics" who discovered him. They stumbled upon his art in their hunt for souvenirs. Thus the fourth facet of Indian modernity dating from the early '40s — the neo-primitive facet—began with a bang. But Roy's own kar and Reddappa Naidu are the most original and provocative artists with a mastery over the folk idiom.

In any survey of modern art in India, a major exponent of primitivism stands out: Rabindranath Tagore, the poet. It is easy to exaggerate the importance of this Sunday painter. Easier still is it to underrate. It is not necessary at all to rationalise Rabindranath's irrational and impulsive art and provide a metaphysical pedestal for it. Dr. Coomaraswamy places Rabindranath's paintings in the correct perspective when he says:

"It would be a great mistake to search in them for hidden spiritual symbolism: They are not meant to be deciphered like puzzles or code messages. It is obvious that he must have looked at many pictures in the course of his long life; but there is nothing in his own work to show that he has seen them. This is a genuinely original, genuinely naive expression; extraordinary evidence of eternal youth persistent in a hoary and venerable personage."

A Sunday Painter

Tagore's art is more spontaneous than his poetry and it is purer and fresher. What strikes one most in a Tagore painting is its primeval intensity. Apparently there is no attempt at organisation. But the inner rhythm is strong enough. The drawing and the colour scheme being untutored are refreshingly naive. But they have a painterly thrust that few professionals achieve. His doodlings reveal his sense of bewilderment at the mystery of life and his determination to express himself as naturally and joyously as possible. His work cannot be assessed in terms of the so-called Indian renaissance. For it represents the core of his humanism in visual shorthand. By combining the directness and intensity of his vision with the intuitive acuteness and accuracy of his technique, Rabindranath, though, untrained and unschooled, heralded a new era in Indian art of which George Keyt and Bhupen Khakkar, also untutored Sunday painters, are the most significant living representatives living. Keyt is no doubt Ceylonese by birth. But his inspiration is profoundly Indian. He can interpret the spirit of Hindu and Buddhist heritage through the medium of an idiom that represents the essence of eclecticism.

What sustains neo-primitivism is, not the artist's intimidating technical virtuosity, but his emancipated, uninhibited state of mind, thoroughly cleansed and totally unconditioned. Once Dr. Varrier Elwin narrated an interesting incident to me. He showed a Jamini Roy cow to a Baiga tribal boy and asked him whether he liked it. The little one said: I don't understand it. "Dr. Elwin persisted: "It is the painting of a cow," he exclaimed. To which the Baiga boy's reply was: "Is it?"

Because of soaring rents many dealers may have to follow Sotheby's example and move to less-expensive quarters. Virginia Zabriskie, who pays $5,000 a says that "for us the last 2 to 2½ years have been a boom time. Business continues to be good, particularly for good things." begin to suffer while the top of the market continues to thrive.

(By arrangement with the International Herald Tribune).

India At Oxford

Nineteen contemporary painters are included in "India — Myth and Reality" currently held at Oxford.

by Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni

BY far the finest exhibition of art within the gigantic Festival of India is now to be seen, not in London, where all the big shows are following one another, but in Oxford, that university town which jealously preserves its old-world architectural identity.

It will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art till August 8.

The Oxford MOMA lies hidden in a small street in the city centre but is obviously a live-wire centre of artistic activity. Ebrahim Alkazi, director of New Delhi's Art Heritage who has master-minded the show, could not have chosen a better venue for his magnificent effort.

The show is titled: "India": Myth and Reality: Aspects of Modern Indian Art." Nineteen contemporary painters are included, ranging from veterans like Husain to young London-based talents like Anish Kapoor.

One enters the museum to gaze at some vintage Husain and Souza. Husain, the peripatetic artist, was here some days ago, painting on the spot — as is his wont—and even conducting a workshop for aspirants of all ages. The legend "Husain, Oxford" graces quite a few works in the show.

Even more impressive than Husain is Francis Newton Souza. Alkazi has procured some absolutely top-class Souza from the fifties and sixties. Souza, expatriate settler in London, was a great name then, something which we can't say about his present status, in the British art world.

These Souza paintings, with their jagged lines and distorted faces, blaze with vitality. Alas, they are a thing of the past.

There are many painters here who have been associated with Alkazi during the past three decades as much as Husain and Souza have been. Raza, Akbar Padamsee, Ram Kumar and Krishen Khanna are represented by their exciting work. Raza's brilliant display of colour, Padamsee's introspective "metascapes", Ram Kumar's stylish landscape-cum-abstractions and Khanna's politically-oriented studies, often seen in shows in India, thrill us with "the shock of recognition".

A pleasant surprise is provided by another great expatriate,

WAITING FOR HIS BELOVED: A painting by Jogen Chowdhury.

Mohan Samant, who has been living for many years in New York. Samant has not shown his work in India for a long time, and the Oxford exhibition provides the first opportunity to many to see the latest phase of his art.

Artists like Satish Gujral, K.G. Subramanyan, Tyeb Mehta and A. Ramachandran show here standard work known well to gallery-goers. Again, in the case of Subramanyan, his Oxford performance is much more impressive than his Tate Gallery showing. He offers terra-cotta panels endowed with an indigenous pictorial charm, which contrasts well with the aggressive modernity of Gujral's sculptural panels.

Tyeb Mehta is one of the few painters here who is seen in a number of progressive phases. From the phase ostensibly influenced by Britain's Francis Bacon, we move on to a work from the "Diagonal" series. Ramachandran, who never exhibits in Bombay, is here with a few large-sized and typically muscular canvases.

There are many painters in the Oxford show who belong to a younger generation; Rameshwar Broota (unfortunately not represented by his contemporary neolithic creatures), Jogen Chowdhury (with typical macabre caricatures), Nalini Malani, Gieve Patel and Sudhir Patwardhan indicate a very wide range. The selection is, indeed, a tribute to Alkazi's well-informed taste.

Among sculptors, Mrinalini Mukherjee sends a number of her modernistic rope sculptures. But more intriguing is the Londoner, Anish Kapoor, who is a teacher of art and a critic in addition to being an artist. Anish has created a dazzling variety of semi-geometrical forms with the aid of the coloured powder which we use for rangoli on Diwali days. These are fantastic creations. A big ball in blue powder stands firmly like a globe on the ground. There are other shapes which combine delicacy with strong gravity, the latter imparted with some sort of glue.

The Oxford show scores over its Tate predecessor even in the matter of the catalogue. The MOMA catalogue is wonderfully well-illustrated, full of diverse and interesting reading matter and printed and designed with a style one associates with the perfectionist in Alkazi. The exhibits are grouped under seven heads. Sample headings: "The urban scene: strangers in the city" or "New myths, new realities."

However, one need not be bothered by the apparent arbitrariness of these groupings or the over-scholarly theorisation of some of the contributors to the catalogue. What matters is the stunning impact of the show which is housed in a big, old-fashioned, building with white brick walls—something which was probably once a warehouse.

There is yet another section of commercial calendars complete with Indian gods and goddesses and portraits of heroes like Bhagat Singh. Simultaneously, shows of Indian film classics are also held every week. Not the least of the exciting things about MOMA are the picture post cards of famous paintings and photographs as well as art books it sells.

Good show, Alkazi! Good show, artists from India! It is a pity that we couldn't plan such a display in London—where the Festival of India bandwagon is currently rolling!