



TRAVAILS OF AN

BY MANJARI BHATNAGAR

Without doubt, he's an Indian at heart but having lived in France for a better part of his life, artist Syed Haider Raza has an equal affinity for the foreign land. He found his calling in India but France nurtured and nourished his passion for art. He married a French lady, Janine but the love for his country saw him spend a quarter of the year on this soil. At age 85, Raza can look backwards and satisfactorily track a life full of love, respect and a career that spiralled well past the zenith of success. However, the perfect past is now an imperfect present. Raza's wish to donate his

priceless treasure of creative wealth to Gorbio, a village in the south of France near Nice, has been turned down by the local authorities. The refusal has not only shocked the art community worldwide but also left the artist himself in a state of extreme disbelief.

From his 16th century plush and spacious apartment in Paris, Raza, however, is still optimistic about seeing his works displayed in Gorbio. Between cooking for himself and answering the doorbell, Raza talks over Alexander Graham Bell's discovery about the sad attitude of the authorities in

His strokes on the canvas have marvelled generations. His trademark *bindi*, in different shapes, sizes and colours, hangs in several homes across the globe absorbing the limelight. Celebrated Indian artist SH Raza has given India and France many reasons to cheer up. However, lately both the countries have upset him with their apathy towards his emotions and works. Raza relates his anguish to *Society* straight from Paris

Controversy reared its head when the Babariya-born artist offered to donate his personal treasure on the condition that it would be on display throughout the year. In order to bear its cost, Raza also offered to set up a foundation and ensure a sum of 500,000 pounds (around Rs four crore) for insurance. The Gorbio authorities, however, refuse to allow an all year spectacle of the works. The product of the Nagpur School of Art and Mumbai's JJ School of Art, Raza, after an interlude to check the cooking food, returns to reply in chaste Hindi, "The problem is about displaying the works. The people of Gorbio have bought a tower in the 12th century chateau and re-done it while artistically retaining its old world charm. I am asking that the tower be given to showcase my works. The authorities say that they will display only half of my works at any given point of time. My condition is that they could give me only half the tower but keep my donation together. I don't want it to be disintegrated at any cost."

The founder of the Progressive Artists Group in India shifted base to Paris in 1950 where he studied art extensively and married fellow artist, Janine Mongillat. The couple had a summerhouse in Gorbio and over the years this abode is as much home to them as their 200 square metre heritage house in Paris. The 1981 Padma Shri awardee says, "I have great attachment with Gorbio. It resembles my little villages in Madhya Pradesh like Babariya, Mandla, Kakariya, Mithila and Narsingpur. I've never felt away from my villages whenever I've visited Gorbio and it's this place that's kept me close to my home in Madhya Pradesh. I learnt all about life here. I realised myself here. This donation is my way of thanking the people

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the French village. "Ongoing efforts have been unyielding as yet but if the pressure from the people of Gorbio prevails, the authorities may have to relent in due course of time. The village of Gorbio has written a petition to the mayor of the village saying that Raza's works should not go elsewhere. They've also written to me to not take the donation to some other place. Some of the highest selling newspapers have also featured this news in my favour besides the views of the locals. In a nutshell, I feel that the collection will stay in Gorbio," says the first non-French awardee of the Prix de la Critique.

and Gorbio for all that they've given me and done for me."

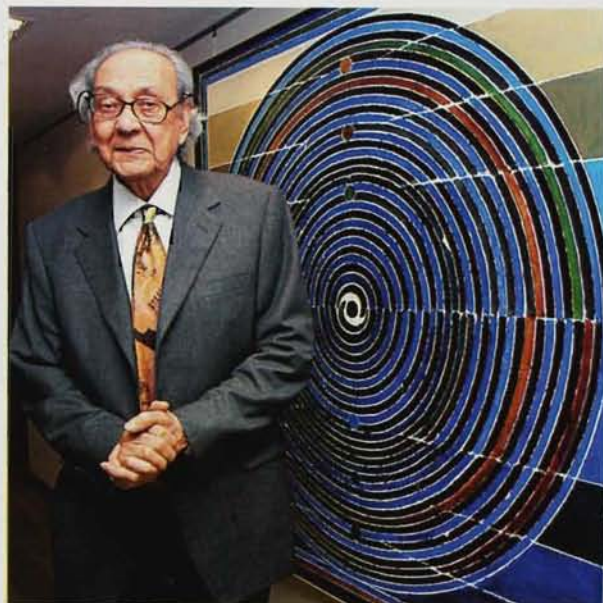
"The donation in question is estimated to be worth seven million pounds (around Rs 56 crore) if sources are to be believed. A section of the media however says that the Gorbio Council found Raza's demand unreasonable. Patrick Simon, the financial director of Gorbio's Council told a newspaper, "For me this isn't a donation; it's an unfair bargain. Safeguarding the fame of an artist against any number of unknown factors." Raza, however, says, "It's a treasure I've collected and cherished all my life. I am giving away these works as a mark of thanks, gratitude and love to the village

that has been my summer residence since the last 40 years. It's the best of my creations and collection. This move is in agreement with Janine. There's politics going on here but I am not interfering. Let's see what happens. I am confident that it will work out."

The artist who made the *bindi* his trademark explains the valuables that comprise his cherished donation, "I will be donating a total of 140 works from my personal collection in all. Of these, 20 will be my works, 23 of Janine while 25 others will be precious works from 25 Indian and French artists. The remaining will be 50 sculptures, woodcarvings and miniatures besides bronzes from the 12th century." Though Raza is confident that his condition will gain acceptance in the Council of Gorbio, he also has alternate plans up his sleeves in case negotiations fall through. "The Museum of Asiatic Art in Nice has also sent me a proposal but it doesn't speak of permanency in any manner. If nothing else happens, I will try and put up this collection at my studio house in Gorbio though that's a small place and will not be able to accommodate my donation completely," he says, adding, "Worse comes to worse I'll bring everything to India."

Why India is his last resort to salvage his dear possessions raises curiosity but possibly it could be because of the deep sentimental value that Raza has for the tiny village. But the grand old man of Indian art explains the reason for his undying love for the village. "My wife Janine expired in April 2002. She was much younger than me but she died before me. We were married for 42 years and she's one of the main reasons I stayed back in France. Janine's burial place is in Gorbio. That's also where I have a place and will be buried when I die unless of course I die in India. In that case, as Janine says, I should be buried next to my mother in Kalyan near Mumbai, where I lived and had a studio before I migrated to France. For all these reasons, I want our valued collection to be in Gorbio." At that moment, Raza ventures again into the kitchen and returns with a glee-laced voice, "My dinner's cooking well and is almost done."

The conversation continues, and this time veers around the patriotism that Raza thrives on. "I come to India every year. This year I should be in India any time now. I have always felt a deep relationship with India. I am an Indian citizen with an Indian passport till now. I love my country and kiss the ground when I arrive in or leave India. I still remember my days at the studio and home in Kalyan. But more than anything I find myself pulled to Damo, my village in Madhya Pradesh where I grew up until I shifted to Mumbai in 1941. Those days are still fresh in my memory," he says, adding a couple of *shayaris*



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in fluent Urdu. "*Dekha, main kuchh nabin bboola*," he says with pride. This conversation has happened in Hindi, Urdu and English at different points of time, with the add-ons of some brilliant *shers* sprouting the renowned *shaayars* whom Raza has read. The philosopher in him also surfaces at intervals but when Raza talks about the love for his homeland, it's only Hindi that he chooses to converse in.

"Madhya Pradesh has always been close to my heart all the time. In fact, I am getting my primary school in Damo, Guru Gobind Pathshala, repaired and it should be done by the time I visit India this month. The last time I visited the school, it was in a dilapidated condition. This structure was very close to me because this school has influenced me a great deal in my growing years. I was almost five years old ever since the headmaster Daini Prasad Sthapak took me under his wing and coached me on the nuances of life and academics. Seeing the school building in that crumbling condition saddened me a great deal. I checked with the people in charge and asked them why they were not rectifying the damage. They said it would cost around Rs 1.5 lakh. I said, 'I'll give you Rs two lakh but get started now.' The work it seems is now complete and I'll visit the school possibly next month. They wanted a room

dedicated to me in the school. I got the room made but christened it after Daini Prasad Sthapak. I told them, Raza is nothing. Sthapak is greater because Raza is Raza only due to Sthapak's teaching and words of wisdom. He was such a great teacher that I remember his teachings even till date." The Madhya Pradesh government held a retrospective of Raza's works in Bhopal some years back and had bestowed the Kalidas Samman on him.

The 85-year-old legend speaks without a quiver in his voice. Just as steadily as his hand reaches out to the canvas. His memory is razor sharp and effortlessly he recites the poems he learnt from Sthapak at his school in Damo. After an idyllic married life, Raza is now in the throes of loneliness. Companionship is what he misses the most and the absence of his ladylove depresses him no end. "There are so many ladies around but there's no one like Janine. I go into depression at times especially when her memories come back to me. I am all alone; away from my country and a tired old man of 85 years. Even back home in India, my siblings are dead and gone. Ditto for my uncles and aunts. I am left alone. Unfortunately, Janine and I didn't have any kids. I do cheer up when people visit me or when I travel but life is not the same as when Janine was around. International fame is fine but I am now a tired man and old age has caught up on me. I cook my own food. A maid comes to clean up the house. I have weak eyesight but I work everyday—my painting cannot stop," explains the man whose mere touch on the canvas spells magic.

There's another reason that's brought unhappiness to the seasoned artist. In spite of great efforts by Indian art bodies like Saffron Art, Raza's much wanted exhibition in Mumbai's National Gallery for Modern Art (NGMA) could not be held. "I was to show some 70-80 works at NGMA but I regret and am deeply saddened that the talks fell through. I know its director Rajeev Lochan very well but I fail to understand why I didn't get the gallery for the show. It was to be in February 2008 and Saffron Art was organising it. There must be some politics at play. I was giving about 50-60 works and would have added some recent works too. I am not criticising anyone and don't want to create a controversy. But when I see that an exhibition of my works can be successfully held without any hiccups in New York this September and another one planned in London this April, I fail to understand why it can't be held in my own Mumbai," says the talented artist but stops abruptly and



With Kalpana Shah of Tao Art Gallery

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excuses himself from the conversation. He returns a while later and announces that while he was reminiscing his wife and the days in India, his food burnt.

He's put something back on the burner but refuses to stay on the phone for long lest it meets a disastrous fate too. "I've told you so much about my life. Now you must know what I am planning for the future. I want to create a Kala Kendra, a cultural centre much on the lines of Rabindranath Tagore's Shantiniketan and Mahatma Gandhi's Sevagram. This won't be commercialised at any cost and will be purely for art lovers and artists. I have friends like Ashok Vajpayee, Akhilesh, Manish Pushkale, Seema Goraia, Arun Vadehra, Kekoo Gandhi of Gallery Chemould and Kalpana Shah of Tao Art Gallery. Together we are all working towards building this centre as soon as possible. We are on a look out for land and this year when I come, I want to do a good amount of work in this regard."

Raza's immense magnitude of work is a legacy that will remain with this world for hundreds of years. Whether it remains in Gorbio or India, doesn't matter. India is proud of its legend whose works of timelessness will continue to garner appreciation and value for times to come. <<

Art/Culture

Mewar's Charan Sharma put up a splendid show in Mumbai this December. *Upasthiti* reveals different aspects of a monk's life in the shadow of the enlightened Buddha. With powerful strokes, Charan portrays the serene and calm face of Buddha encompassing the existence of the little followers in his warmth. *Upasthiti* is amongst Charan's best known works till date.



Self taught painter and income tax officer by profession Neena Singh's second painting exhibition, inspired by elements of nature entitled, *Abhyam Debi Devesh* saw heart touching themes like the *Joy of Being* and *Awakening*. Marked by great textures and indepth thought process, the paintings are a visual treat at Artists Centre. Her first painting exhibition held at Jehangir Art Gallery had elicited an overwhelming response too.



Artist Gautam Patole put up a fabulous show of his works in Mumbai recently. Presented by Indusvista Art Gallery and Artdesh-The Studio, Gautam's *Beauty in Charcoal* was highly appreciated. With strong strokes and neat figures, Gautam's best works were nudes prompting Pooja Bedi to pick up one. *Monsoon, Sleeping Beauty, Dancers* and *Three Women* are some of his mind-blowing works but as the artist says, the best ones are yet to come.



Artland's year-end bonanza to artists and art lovers, Colours-2007 was held at Mumbai's Prince of Wales Museum. Among the 70 artists who participated in the eight-day exhibition were Charan Sharma, Wasim Kapoor, Vrindavan Solanki, Vinod Sharma, Sameer Mandol, Sukanta Das, Ananya Banerjee, Lalitha Lajmi, Brinda Miller, Shahed Pasha, Subhash Awachat, Debjani Datta and Asit Patnaik. A delightful visual treat it was!

