

HIS DAYS OF COLOUR BURN

SAYED HAIDER RAZA

turned 80 last month. The artist, who spent much of his life in France, has remained rooted in Indian tradition. He talks to SHANA M VERGHIS

There is an old black and white picture dating back to the forties, which has the young founder members of the Progressive Movement in Indian art freeze-framed for posterity. To the left is a wide-eyed Sayed Haider Raza, head topped by a black shock of hair, captured as though he were about to pounce on the camera man. Near him, Francis Newton Souza lounges, almost desultory. There are others, the late VS Gaitonde, his face, dreamy, skimming innocence. Maqbool Fida Husain for all the flamboyance that followed, is a shadowy figure between two other artists in the picture, round-faced, dark-eyes, sharp and secretive.

Early photographs of Raza bring out a certain endearing sweetness allied with burning intensity. In later years, these traits forcefully gathered in a persona who has come full circle through the story of his life. A life that began in Babbaria, Madhya Pradesh, near the Narmada. The Raza you meet, the older version, is dignified in an evening suit, delivering a thank-you speech at an award function organised on his behalf by the French Embassy in Delhi. They were conferring on him the high honour of Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters. But even this polite outer garb fails to distract you from the seismic turbulence that rushes to the surface, the clenched teeth that send out a stream of vulnerable passion so honest it hurts.

Someone recently commented, "Raza indulges in interpretation that produces something beyond pleasure and the process of joy—the *Shanti Rasa*. His is a free, nonchalant, and sceptical celebration of man." "Sceptical" is a curious contradiction with the other word 'free', but it is part of the nature of the artist who said in an interview that France, where he has lived for 52 years, gave him clear thinking—"I feel that human beings with this extraordinary facility of thinking and reasoning can give themselves a direction."

The higher order of the human condition has been his fervent consideration for nearly half a century. It has found expression through signs and symbols of Indian ethnography like the *bindu*. But in an exquisitely detailed *tete-a-tete* with poet Ashok Vajpei, who included its text with a poem dedicated to the artist in a limited edition book released during the function, he clarified: "It's not because I use signs and symbols of India that I became an Indian painter...It is in its essence. If the work is just an exterior demonstration of signs and symbols, it cannot be essential. Everyone can draw *bindu*, everyone can do a triangle or arch...Is it possible that a *naad bindu* could radiate in space like the Indian vocal or instrumental music does?" Raza was earnest that people know what he is doing now—"a synthesis of my studies in



France and values of the country where I was born and am very attached to." The result of these two worlds compounds imagery seen in abstract works such as *Bindu Nath*, *Prakriti*, *Rajasthan*, *Kundalini*, *Tama Shunya*, *Garbha Graha*. Careful in his choice of words, Raza explained, "These themes, symbols from Hindu *darshan* have been haunting me for 20 years. I have been trying to rediscover these great ideas. As a painter my attempt is not to make an essay of these concepts, the assumption of *Prakriti*. I have to realise the paintings, canvases were important. To be fully understood and respected."

The "colour burnt man", as Vajpei referred to him, continued, "A metamorphosis of forms takes place and coloured form orchestration is fully perceived. I think in these recent works, there's an effort to go towards simplicity and intensity of space and colour relationships in such a way that colour can have almost a musical resonance."

He paused introspectively: "We all know that in our tradition when a statue of a divinity is placed in a temple of home—the ceremony called *pran pratistha*—a brahmin or priest does the ritual, investing it with a divine presence. In a painting, something similar should happen. The place should be consecrated (*Dig pratisthan*), so the

space is invested by feeling. The artist has to do this himself. Look at Trimurti in Ellora, the Nataraja in Mathura. The artist is only a medium, he executes work, but spirits direct him. Without this there is no great art—*Kala karm mein diya shaktiyon ki sahyog anivarya hai*. This leads Indian painting in a certain direction. VS Gaitonde was an example, Tyeb Mehta, Manjit Bawa and Subramaniam are others dwelling on spiritual expression in contemporary Indian art. Perception of form is pure *kala*. These paintings have structures akin to music and colour plays an important part."

He was happy to note painters in India working in different directions, expressing a variety of temperaments. For him, the success of their efforts would depend on them showing Indian painting as deeply rooted. "That we have a distinct perception which belongs to our art in history, not borrowed from elsewhere." He said he had not painted his last pictures yet. "They are going to be white, off-white."

He follows the Indian art scene closely and notices installation work and more—"the tools are many, but each artist should come to his/her own conclusions. Nalini Malini and Vivan Sundaram are doing serious work. Something that's a personal expression."

"My own earlier work", he smiled revealing missing front teeth, "were sins of youth."

"From 1975-78 I began my journey, regularly visiting India to reach my childhood in Narsimpur, Mandala, where I was a poor boy, the teachers who taught me about Ram Charit Manas, Tulsidas and other important concepts. I enquired about Kundalini, the latent energy. It has been a long thought process. You study, make mistakes. There comes a time when a painter develops his personal vision. He stops thinking and intuition takes over. A state where there is direct perception, organised madness. It's spiritual, total concentration." He quoted, "You are near me only when there is no one else", (*Mere ko giridhar Gopal, doosron na ko*) Mira sang to Lord Krishna. "It is a yogic exercise with the image and theme and ultimately a prayer. In globalisation there are changes and advantages, but these should not pose hurdles. I access information on the Net relating to subjects like exhibitions, but we must know how to use the medium. Concepts must come from the man who understands them. Henri Cartier-Bresson knew what was important to his picture and what had to be eliminated. I was working towards white with the view that I should eliminate the unnecessary, to shade it expressive, forceful. Colour has

different harmonies—*rasas*—like love. Night for instance has different notes. These harmonies for me are black, red, yellow, white and blue.

Concluded, "Mine is also a quest for simplicity. Black is the mother colour, white, the spiritual, something pure. And the pure light remains in itself. I stopped work on white canvases because my wife Janine has been unwell. I had to take care of her. These works will deal with peace. I hope they evoke a spiritual climate to which we all aspire. Painting like high religion can take one to elevated spiritual experience. I will call it *Upshanto Yamathma*, the perfect image of peace."

