

Giving form to feeling

Ratnottama Sengupta meets painter Laxman Pai, who is currently showing in the Capital

ART



The greys and blues and whites do not define a hard form. Like the dark clouds and the horizon and the drone of a ceaseless down-pour, they are an indistinguishable, blurred mass of a total experience. And the abstraction of the rainfall is set off by a twig that has, at the magic touch of raindrops, opened its eye to this beautiful world.

The warmth of gold and russet bathes the canvas that follows in the series. But why does the face within the picturespace look so wan? Is it the falling leaves that's blurring the world around her? Come winter and

and then comes back to a *sthayee*," Pai continues. "And so can a visual artist, through variations of tones in the same colour. It is possible," he stresses, "because an artist gives form to only a feeling, a mood." So what is titled *Rain* may be given any other name, and yet the artist's account of an experience will remain unaffected.

To reinforce his argument Pai refers to the controversy agitating all in the art fraternity. "The criticism of Husain for wiping out the pictures is meaningless," he maintains. "For, though the starting point was a goddess, the result was a work of art independent of the theme."

Why doesn't Pai actually refrain from titling his works, then? "Because titles invoke certain associations which I certainly want to keep," he explains. If you take a figure from the Hindu pantheon, for



the colours turn bleak, even harsh. The forms are condensed as if withdrawing into themselves. It's a far cry from summer when the atmosphere draws you out. Before that happens, life must burst forth with a spring in its gait.

It is a Festival of Seasons all right: you would have known as much even if the series of canvases now on view at Shridharani -- his 86th show -- was not titled so. And if Laxman Pai could help it, he would not ever title a painting. For, a title only obstructs a viewer's enjoyment of the harmony in the movement of lines and colours, he firmly believes.

"It's like this," explains the 67-year-old, Padmashri honoured artist: "When I say 'Sunset' the viewer looks at the canvas and seeks in it a confirmation of his experience. And what one carries in the mind's eye rarely concurs with another's visual expression."

Pai contrasts it with the aural experience: "A listener always responds to the notes, to the melody created by their juxtaposition: never to the name of the raga."

"A Kumar Gandharva dives deep into a note, plays on the phrases,

example, then you have to retain certain elements that are associated with the god or goddess. That is the challenge Ravi Verma rose to and painted a Saraswati who was realistic in every way yet had four arms.

"The challenge lies in that you have to keep within the prescribed framework and yet ensure that the work is an original creation and not mere illustration." So when Pai obliges friends by painting Lakshmis, both are *kamalasina* (seated on a lotus). Yet one of them is, true to Pai's *nayikas*, decorative in the vein of a classical beauty, and another acquires the texture of a Chinese painting as the artist plays on the tones with a comb to get the vibrations of a note.

The artist, it is clear then, wants a theme so that he can rise above its strictures. But he will not be forced by one to appeal only to sectarian taste. He would not, therefore, be carried away by the success of *Geeta Govind* to attempt a *Dasavatar*. And precisely 30 years after his inspiring *Ritusamhara*, we find him gently moving away from the demands of a Kalidasa to the universal, and more expansive, theme of seasons.

How not to protect consumers

CONSUMERS need protection against sharp business practice and callous government monopolies, and so I have long hailed groups fighting for consumer rights. However, there are good and bad ways of protecting consumers. I am alarmed that consumer activists have persuaded the ministry of civil supplies to specify standard pack sizes for not only soft drinks but jams, jellies, ketchup, butter, milk powder, and other packaged edibles. This is a return to the *neta-babu-pandit raj* with the difference that the government is being egged on, not by golden-hearted socialists but by golden-hearted consumer activists. The results will be just as bad.

Activists say businessmen use varying pack sizes to fool consumers. Consumers may not easily distinguish a bottle of 250 ml from one of 300 ml, so why not have just a few standard sizes that make differences clear-cut? The ministry agrees, and proposes to ban cola drinks in 300 ml. bottles, ketchup bottles of 300 mg, 600 mg, 800 mg or 900 mg, and so on through a whole range of products.

LENINISM: The underlying assumption is that consumers can be foolish, so wise activists must protect consumers from the conse-

pany, Asian Paints, took on the multinationals on the hunch that poor Indian consumers wanted paints in small packs, even though this raised the cost per litre. This was because larger packs would not be fully utilised, and poor people did not want to lock up cash in unutilised paint. The multinationals initially sneered, then turned pale as Asian Paints swept the market and became the top company.

Vicks cough drops were sold for ages in standard packs, but sales did not rise fast enough. The manufacturer experimented with smaller and smaller packs, ending with a single cough drop pack. Consumers loved this, and sales skyrocketed. Nobody could have foretold this in advance — only actual experimentation could prove what people wanted.

Tiny shampoo sachets of Velvette and other small companies have thrashed once-proud international brands like Sunsilk. Millions of people buy single tablets of aspirin from pan-shops even though the cost per tablet works out higher than buying a standard 10-tablet strip. Such examples can be multiplied a thousand-fold.

If golden-hearted activists had their way in the past in standard-



SWAMINOMICS

SWAMINATHAN S. ANKLESARIA AIYAR

quences of their folly. Alas, this is Leninism by another name. Voters in a democracy can certainly be foolish, and certainly get taken for a ride by devious politicians. Do we therefore lay down that only politicians of a standard size—5 feet 6 inches tall, weighing 70 kilos, with a cranial capacity of 800 ml—should be allowed to contest elections?

Lenin wanted to standardise not the height and weight of politicians in the political marketplace but their views. To protect unsuspecting voters from the unscrupulous parties we have in a normal democracy, he decreed that only candidates of the virtuous Communist Party could contest. He believed quite genuinely that this was a vital form of consumer protection. The rest is history.

In fact consumers, no matter how foolish, are wiser than activists can ever be. The collapse of communism showed how supposedly wise guardians fail to meet public needs. A critical reason is that nobody, however, can know in advance what consumers want, not even consumers themselves. This is why 90 per cent of new consumer products fail, despite the most intensive market research. This is most true of fast-changing markets where new innovations keep expanding the range of possible products and packs. Time and again entrepreneurs have de-

ising packs, Asian Paints would never have beaten the multinationals; Sunsilk Shampoo bottles would outsell Velvette sachets; millions would suffer headaches rather than buy a full strip of aspirin; and millions would curse the activists for daring to speak in their name.

INFORMATION: The right way of protecting consumers is by guarding against adulteration, maximising choice through the widest possible competition, and maximising the flow of information. Consumers make mistakes, but given enough choice and competition, they will soon learn the real merits of different products and pack sizes, just as they learn the merits of different politicians through electoral choice. Competition plus sensible regulation is necessary to thwart cartels and monopolies, and we must maximise information stamped on every pack to help consumers choose wisely. The information must specify not only weight and volume but also the price per kilo or litre, helping the consumer assess value for money. The pack must specify the ingredients used. Consumer magazines and pamphlets are needed to heighten awareness, as also consumer columns in newspapers. Even after all this, some consumers will be taken for a ride. But this

MARQUEE

Does the sponsor call the tune?

Should artists accept political or corporate sponsorship? And by doing so, do they endorse the sponsor's viewpoint? Ratnottama Sengupta meets a cross-section of artists and others concerned to delve into the controversy



Amjad Ali Khan

Of late, the questions seem to have acquired a new dimension for the entire community of performing artists. Only recently, when film stars were being taken to task for working in films funded by the underworld, no less a figure than Amitabh Bachchan had said: "We're like passengers at a bus stop. We get into the bus that is before us," implying that an artist does not — perhaps even cannot — delve deep into the source of the funds. And now, when Sonal Mansingh is being pointedly questioned about her participation in the World Vision 2000 conference, being held by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in Washington next week, she asks: "Don't lawyers defend criminals for a fee? Do newspapers refuse to carry the advertisements of political parties, because they uphold certain views? Don't we all, exponents of 'pure art' — musicians, dancers, artists — perform for ITC even though we know fully well that their money comes from selling cigarettes?"

The VHP, some would point out to the leading danceuse, is an organisation which has faced bans for its track record of communal politics. That their freedom of

plains. "For those who care to listen: I culled episodes from scriptures of the major faiths of our land — Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity. I start with the *Shabad Manas ki jaat sabhi ek bhayi jano*, and end with *Vaishnav jana to...* Is this anti-secular, or against the pluralistic ethos of our composite culture?" she queries.

Anuradha Paudwal is also going to Washington for Vivekananda, the playback artist said. "I know nothing about it being a VHP jamboree. I was contacted by a few friends for a global conference on Swami Vivekananda's Vedantic message. I am going there because I have been influenced by Swami ji's teachings — and I am going purely as an artist. I have absolutely nothing to do with politics."

Sonal Mansingh, to put the record straight, has espoused several causes including political ones through her performances. In her own words, "I've performed for Cancer, for Spastics, for the Blind, I've performed in Delhi, Aligarh and Bombay for SAHMAT. I performed for the CPM-organised concert for Cuba. And during the emergency, when my contemporaries were singing paeans to Indira Gandhi, I was the only one who did not. As a result, I continue to live in a rented place, and am dragged to Tees Hazari every now and then by the landlord, when everybody who is an anybody in Delhi's art world has a government accommodation!"

Apart from the shadow on her secular credentials, Sonal is also



Swapna Sundari

stung to the core as an artist. "We're still living in a democratic country where I am free to express myself through my art, aren't we?" And on this, the dancer has not only the entire fraternity but also constitutional experts and defenders of human rights on her side. With one voice, every artist has said: "An artist is free to perform wherever she chooses to, as long as she is not told what to perform." And, as long as the proceeds of the concert are not going to fund an organisation whose aims and policies are anti-human rights — "supporting apartheid, or ethnic cleansing," substantiates former attorney general Soli Sorabjee.

If the objective of the conference in Washington is to commemorate Vivekananda's visit to the USA, "it is a laudable objective and it does not cease to be so because VHP has organised it," the legal



Sonal Mansingh

luminary is quite categorical. If we argue against VHP on political grounds, then those against leftist policies could stop people from performing for Cuba. And on moral grounds, "someone could well demand that don't perform for the government, because the Congress is corrupt," adds Sorabjee.

The government is seldom seen as a separate entity from the party in power. And even so, government sponsorship is not seen as political sponsorship. "It is the state machinery that is supporting the arts and the artists," argues sarod maestro Amjad Ali Khan. "The government is the representative of the people, and artists as citizens need their support irrespective of which party is in power." Reiterating that party and politics are immaterial to the artist, Dhrupad singer Zahiruddin Dagar adds: "For centuries, down

19 generations we have preserved our ancient tradition. If we were to be swayed by political upheavals, where would our art be?"

Perhaps because music and dance have, till the time of independence, prospered under feudal patronage, panegyrics have been a tradition. So few questioned M.F. Husain when he painted Indira Gandhi as Shakti, or Yamini Krishnamurti when she danced a specially composed item paying homage to the Prime Minister during the emergency. Now the prima donna of Bharatanatyam, who once declared that "Patronage is a dirty word!" chooses to be circumspect. "Where is the professional theatre in this country?" she laments. "In the absence of a competitive impresario system, when the state is the most important promotional and funding agency for the arts, can we have a healthy environment?" she wonders. "When every professional opportunity is subject to political patronage, can we really blame the artist of extracting favours from politicians?"

The sarod maestro too cites the past to suggest that artists have, "down centuries, gone to perform wherever he has been invited with respect," be it by a raja-maharaja, or otherwise. "They may not have been choosy because of economic considerations, but that is the tradition. And that is professional too. How else can we choose our organisers? When we are forgoing our professional fee for a cause, the parameters may be different.



Soli Sorabjee

Otherwise, there can be no restriction for a professional artist. As long as the artist is not advocating the ideology or policy of the sponsors — political or corporate — it is of no consequence who the organiser is." Just as it is immaterial who the listener is — as long as he is a genuine listener, a *rasika*, the maestro adds, "Atal Behari Vajpayee is wonderful as a listener, and as such I value him. His politics is a different matter." But, then, does Amitabh Bachchan have only Congress supporters for his fans?

Kuchipudi exponent Swapna Sundari agrees that a professional performance for a private sector company does not amount to campaigning for their products. By the same token, she says, a professional may not be endorsing the ideologies of the party — in government or otherwise — which invites her to perform for it. "However," she does not mince words, "This does not actually happen. Useful political alignments are formed and more often than not, performances may be undertaken with an eye on future returns or opportunities."

"I don't support, and I will never support their kind of activity," says a vehement Hari Prasad

Chaurasia. But the flautist is also headed for Washington and will perform in World Vision 2000. For, he says, "I will not be playing for their private pleasure, nor will I give a lecture on their philosophy. I am a musician, and I will perform to extend the community of music loving people. For when people love music, they cannot have destructive thoughts."

The senior Dagar adds: "You may say we are backward. But for no reason would I compromise with my art (of Dhrupad). For it brings peace of mind, no matter where we are performing. And living in free India, I have the freedom to perform where I choose to, so long as the atmosphere (forum) is conducive," he continues. "If I so wish, I perform free for relief funds. And not even recording companies tell me what to sing. I sing of the Hindu *dev-devis*, and I sing of the Muslim *peers* and *rasool*. My religion has never alienated me from Hinduism — not in my art, not in my friends, not in people around me. My art is a spiritual quest — and I pray to God that it may evoke peace and love in the mind of all my listeners."

What emerges at the end of it all is that freedom of expression being integral to artistic activity, the professional artist is free to exercise his or her freedom. There can be no censorship on this because of political considerations. But whether we admit it or not, in a country where there is little private funding for performing art, artists knowingly or unknowingly lend their support to various political parties, and sometimes even jump camps for the right opportunity. And so long as we don't have an artist's guild where they themselves can take a unanimous decision, we must leave it to the conscience of the artist to exercise discretion.

With reports from S. Kalidas in Delhi and S. Chattopadhyay in Bombay

THE SUNDAY TIMES OF INDIA

White elephant



GUEST COLUMN

MIRA MAZOOMDAR

As the television scene gets "curiouser and curiouser", the changes envisaged and the manner in which they are

sought to be introduced, have become a matter of amusement. After sleeping through the gathering storm for the past few years, suddenly the government has galvanised itself into frenetic activity. In a haphazard manner, without much thought, public debate or policy decision, it has come up with a series of contradictory plans. In this panic situation and crisis (mis) management along with the bath water, the baby, Doordarshan (DD), has all but been thrown out.

The underlying assumption behind the emerging scenario is that since DD has been unable to deliver the goods, private companies should be entrusted with the task. This will also serve "public interest" which nowadays seems to be to find ways and means of earning commercial revenue and to prevent such funds from flowing into the coffers of STAR and Zee TV.

Unfortunately any change, no matter how unworkable, is being welcomed. The woeful track record of the information and broadcasting ministry and DD have led to public apathy towards the official media. Among the basic failures with the first is that successive governments, contrary to official pronouncements, public expectations and dictates of realistic common sense, have tightened, rather than loosened, their stranglehold over All India Radio (AIR) and DD. This is clear from the way in which a wishy-washy sort of autonomy enshrined in the Prasar Bharati Bill con-

as a response to action taken against the then Engineer-in-Chief of DD).

No wonder that the ministry officials who may seem efficient generalists are essentially birds of passage with no previous media policy-making expertise. And privatisation has been brought in through the back door so to speak, without any official change of policy or through a parliamentary channel.

In their roller-coaster ride to gain commercial objectives, the government seems content to leave DD by the wayside or 'market place', making Mandi House live up to its name. None of the committees set up in recent months or, plans and action introduced, devote any time or thought to the ways and means of improving DD.

But even within the existing framework, it should have been possible to shed obsolete ideas and formats by now and introduce a much-needed fresh approach.

One sees apathy, defeatism and lack of concern all around.

Everyone is content with shifting blame on others.

In such a situation top officials can be moved from pillar to post with not so much as a

tank and come up with a new blue print for programmes. This was much before Zee TV and the Metro channel took up many of these formats. But, of course, advice gratis usually falls on deaf ears!

What is equally, if not more, disheartening is that regional and local broadcasting are still being shamefully neglected. If conducted imaginatively as is done elsewhere they are a sure draw, and effective means of two-way communication. Audiences relate to them as they are participants in issues which are of direct concern to them. Public interest broadcasting can be made imaginative and interesting and need not be so dull and boring. We have only to look at organisations like the Canadian and Australian Broadcasting Corporations, the Public Broadcasting Service of USA, not to speak of BBC, to see how they hold their own, against commercial channels. Only last week BBC announced a massive investment in local broadcasting.

Among the many body blows being dealt to DD is the projected so called "enrichment" satellite channel. Assuming that the prevailing mess created by the hastily drawn up five-channel scheme is ultimately resolved, let us see how this channel can affect DD's output.

It corresponds to the service DD is required to provide with the exception of rural programmes. By a recent diktat, DD has been debarred from commissioning outside productions, even though they enriched its own programme output. But soon, not only outside producers but government departments will be offered this new opening on the satellite channel in preference to DD. Why? And how is DD expected to improve and fill up its long transmission hours? Is it not more logical to provide one worthwhile national channel along with equally important regional

My name is Lakhan

THE cameo performed by Mr Ram Lakhan Singh Yadav in the Lok Sabha this week reminded bemused observers of a song from a Hindi film. Ram and Lakhan, the two brothers in the film Ram Lakhan, epitomised virtue and evil respectively. And Lakhan, a trickster, in one sequence sings a song declaring what his vocation is.

The somewhat inane wordings were: "...main jo karoon, wohi karo jee/one-two ka four/aur four-two ka one/ Mera naam hai Lakhan" (I am a trickster who can make or mar fortunes). What reminded political observers of the song was not merely the resemblance that Mr Ram Lakhan Singh Yadav's name bears with the title of the film, but also because the man has been a past master in the game of numbers -- a cunning floor-manager if ever there was one.

Not that he always managed to back the winning horse but his earthy political sense enabled him to get state governments in Bihar toppled while he remained close to the centres of power, biding his time. And like the traditional Congressman, Ram Lakhan *babu*, as he is known in political circles, has come to represent both the noble as well as the venal in the political system. Mr Ajit Singh has only himself to blame if he remained blissfully ignorant of the film, the song and the man.

A day after he had bailed out the doddering government of Mr P.V. Narasimha Rao, the *chakra* Bihar



SECOND IMPRESSION

RAM LAKHAN SINGH YADAV

standing, was perhaps more 'Congress minded' than many others who are now in the opposition.

There were other calculations too, which guided his action. The old war horse, who turned 73 in March this year, had decided in 1991 to finally shift to the Parliament once it became clear that his ambition of ending his career as the chief minister of Bihar may

in the state for less than four years. Most of it was spent by him as the public works department minister in the mid-'60s, which earned for him considerable notoriety for corruption and later an indictment from the Aiyar Commission set up to inquire into minister's misconduct. He had to wait for 23 long years before he was made a minister again in 1989-90, this time for

ensured that the building is occupied even as construction progressed and allowed him to adjust part of the rent against the loan.

Uncharitable critics have described him as a mafia king, for having promoted the 'education mafia' in the state. And even his supporters admit that a staggering 150 degree colleges were set up in the state due to his efforts. Fifty-four of them apparently bear his name and eight have actually be converted into constituent colleges of different universities. Land to set up the colleges were all 'donated' by obliging people and most of the lecturers were 'appointed' on condition that they should donate money and sustain the college till the formalities were completed and the government agreed to dole out money to sustain them. Mushroom growth of such colleges became a public scandal but Ram Lakhan *babu* remained unfazed and untouched by the controversy.

A Yadav associate of the man justified his action this week. Ninety per cent of the staff in the colleges set up by Ram Lakhan *babu*, he said, were Yadavs and but for the veteran leader's zeal they would never have secured employment. The colleges also opened up avenues of higher education to students belonging to backward castes in the state. And, finally, when upper caste landlords and politicians could set up colleges named after themselves, why in the blazes could