

Raza's Bindu or Point.

Suresh Sharma.

This essay in memory of Syed Haidar Raza is based on a conversation with the Great Master (Shunya aur Aakar: Form and Nothingness, 28th February 2007) on form as an idea and artistic experience, I had the privilege to initiate on behalf of Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi. Raza sahib's insistence was that he would listen. But he did speak: in Hindi, French and English. His words crafted with care and nuance, were never too many. The intent was to make conversation possible from within that distinctly modern form called 'social/human science' with that most ancient cognitive form, art and aesthetics.

Social Science as a quest to make sense of the world and us is moved by an ineluctable expectation towards measurable clarity concerning certain vital facts and functions. As mode and method it seeks to mark or at least indicate structures, connections and their implications in reference to which one could figure out the salient sequence in the formation and functions of social facts-phenomena. Raza Sahib's quest is differently situated. Its formative ground need have no concern for sequence, structure or implications. Unlike social science, its expressive cardinals belong not to words but to the realm of graphic forms and colours. In social science the definitive concern is with social facts, their representative forms and measurement. In and for social science, word is the final arbiter. In the universe that Raza inhabits graphic forms, unlike words, stand forth unique and untranslatable. That makes conversation with Raza sahib an extraordinary moment of a rare kind: sensing-knowing the relationship between form and meaning in which word has no intrinsic presence.

In speaking of 'form', Raza sahib would often invoke the *bindu* or point in 'movement absolutely free' and Rilke's 'inner necessity', a pristine impulse beyond conditioning and control. For him that magical 'movement absolutely free' began when his teacher in the remote little village school in Babaria (Mandla, Central India) made him sit down and focus on a little white dot on the

blackboard to help still his restless distraction. *Bindu* or point, in Raza's rendering, subsumes as literal marker and as graphic metaphor beginning and end: his own, and of being itself. Preoccupation with beginnings runs intense in human life. There seems no escape from it. And in that is implicit a deep concern with ends. Both, beginnings and ends abide exceedingly uncertain. To truly mark ends and beginnings is difficult in the extreme. Sequence or rather the idea of order in reference to which ends and beginnings are sought is itself intensely elusive. And yet, without ends and beginning making sense of all that abides between them seems utterly unthinkable: all that we are and seek to know live for and experience. Beginnings and ends seem always intimately joined. Each end marks another beginning. Month's end for instance, marks the beginning of a new one: ineffaceable reminder of Time as the arbiter beyond finality.

Bindu is Raza's leitmotif. It marks one could say, the point of poise and arrival in Raza's fervent search for authentic belonging to Indic origins and artistic universals. In it ends and beginnings rustle inseparable. Raza's fascination with the *Bindu* unto his last unfinished canvas wafts along philosophic intimations of the pristine, the essential. *Bindu* is the chosen form to speak of the zero and void, nothingness and infinite possibility. It is a subtle reminder of deep convergence in human cognition that abides clear beyond the ambit of historical contact or any possible tangible act of communication. Point as the form representing Zero or nothingness originates in two completely independent historical civilizational matrices subsisting as it were, at an absolute remove from each other: Mayan and Indian. It is a case not just of an occurrence that is similar but an occurrence that is identical. Consider the enticing paradox that spontaneous convergence embodies. *Bindu* or point one could say is 'some-thing' signifying 'no-thing'. As a form devoid of dimensions, it signifies negation of the very idea of form: a thing of space or dimension and distance. Precisely in that way, 'zero' and 'infinity' are conceptions within the matrix of numbers but inexpressible as a number.

Ananda Coomaraswamy has marked the semantic cardinal that joins words for void (*sunya*), space (*akasa*), outer space (*antariksa*), infinity (*ananta*), and complete or whole (*purna*). In

the Indic philosophic imaginary they are all 'verbal symbols' of the mathematical Zero designated by the word *Kha. Akasa* in this context specifies not 'physical space' but the pure principle of space 'without dimensions' through the 'matrix of dimensions'. Coomaraswamy cites the ancient Mathematician Bhaskara to indicate the deep subtle connections herein between scientific-philosophic and mathematical terminology; predication of the mathematical Zero (*Kha*) upon metaphysical presupposition of infinity (*ananta*).

"This fraction, of which the denominator is Zero, is called an infinite quantity. In this quantity consisting of that which has cipher for its divisor, there is no alteration, though many be added or subtracted; just as there is no alteration in the Infinite Immovable (*anante acyute*) at the time of the emanation or resolutions of worlds, though hosts of beings are emanated or withdrawn".

Bindu or point as the symbol-signifier of zero or nothingness has a stupendous presence in human cognition. Its presence is definitive in fields as varied as mathematics, philosophy, counting, trade and painting. Vanishing point, that stupendous conceptual gift of the European Renaissance for perspective in painting would make no sense without the zero or nothingness as a referent. The capacity to count, like words modulated in a structure of infinite reference to signify meaning, holds true for all humans. There is no known human community ever which would be unable to recognise that dense abstraction called numbers. Little communities living in extreme near complete isolation may be able to count up to say, only twenty, or five. But the profoundly abstract journey implicit in the act of counting is known and grasped. The acute sense that the farthest point of the journey, the last number named, is not the journey's final point of rest stands forth in the very act of counting. The profound journey implicit in the primal step of counting is akin to the stupendous journey implicit in utterance of the first word. Unlike words, numbers possess a certain image-like quality of standing alone, an entirety by themselves. Origins of writing are intimately bound with counting. One could speak of the making of visible signs for counting and speech - numbers and writing - as the reification of inherently invisible conceptual categories. Reification therein signifies the making, as it were, of a thing through which speech and counting is frozen and rescued from

forgetfulness that invariably happens in the natural flow of life and existence. In reification memory acquires a locus that transcends human lives. Human memory abides thus in inherently fluid intimacy with artefacts and art.

Two ancient formulations address the wondrous play of life and cognition as a subtle beginning beyond sequence-lineage:

- **World and life in Pythagorean reckoning begins with numbers.**
- **In the Indic philosophic imaginary beginning-form are inseparable from dissolution and formlessness.**

In the words of Raza sahib:

- **Nothing is intrinsically altered in the process of art.**
- **Art represents hope beyond knowledge.**