

The Great Master Departs.

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Sayed Haider Raza or Raza Saheb, as his friends and admirers fondly addressed him, breathed his last on 23rd July 2016 in Delhi and was laid to rest as he had wished besides his father's grave in Mandla (24th July), a little tribal town in Central India. Three villagers from nearby Babaria, the tiny village where Raza was born (22nd February 1922), had lovingly brought a handful of earth for the burial. They remembered fondly that whenever he visited their village from far away Paris or Delhi, he would first kiss the village earth. Raza Saheb's 94 years were full of color, immense generosity, phenomenal zest, and above all sheer devotion to his chosen vocation painting. He was one of the greats of arts in modern India, the finest colorists of our times and a tireless creator of paintings with a deep sense of light within. Raza's father Sayed Mohammed Razi was a Forest Ranger and his mother Tahira Begum, a gentle deeply caring woman. He spent his childhood in the midst of forests, seeing and living very close to nature. In the classroom of his village school his mind would wonder restless. To help him calm and keep focus, his teacher put a *Bindu* (dot) on the wall and asked Raza to concentrate upon it. This event reminds me of Rodin's advice to Rilke to go to a zoo to learn to 'look'. This simple act of his teacher completely changed the nature of attention for young Raza. He began to see and feel the presence of colors and images in that little dot on the wall; sharp and vivid and yet almost not there. The tiny dot was to become the source and referent of Raza's truly original sequence of paintings called ' Bindu' in the nineteen seventies. Colors he remembered seeing and sensing through that little dot imbued his paintings with a unique sense of color for which lovers of his art remember him with such fondness.

After completing his high school studies in Damoh, Raza moved first to Nagpur (1939 – 43) and then to Mumbai for art studies (1943 - 47). In 1947 Raza Saheb

made a lonely and what must have been an acutely wrenching choice to remain in India while most of his family members migrated to Pakistan. In Mumbai, he enrolled at the famous J. J. School of Arts and came in contact with gifted young painters like Maqbool Fida Hussain, Akbar Padamsee, and Krishna Khanna. They were all struggling at that time to find their way. The year 1947 was Very soon he became part of the Progressive Artists Group (PAG), which included almost all the great modern painters like Francis Newton Souza, M F Hussain, K.H. Ara, Raza and others. Together they sought to give a new creative direction to painting in modern urban India. Their attempt was to paint without bias or clichés. The concern was to realize their freedom on canvas rather than display their identity as Indian painters. The search was to find their identity as painters while painting in India. They kept clear of any hangover of the kind that the Bengal school of painting was stuck with in its insistence upon painting in an authentic Indian way. They also kept their distance from the influence of painters like Raja Ravi Varma who painted Indian mythological characters in a completely Western linear perspective and space. The Progressive group made a bold opening for Indian arts to be free and creative in the newly found freedom in independent India. In the early fifties Raza was in Kashmir to do landscapes. He chanced upon the iconic French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson and they became friends. Bresson suggested that he learns to 'construct paintings', the way a building is done. And that stirred in him the desire to be in Paris. In October 1950 Raza came to Paris on a French Government scholarship to study at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (1950 -53) in search of his own *marga* or way. Raza's Indianness abides in its openness to other traditions of paintings and art but in a way uniquely his and Indian. But that Indianness is not a version of the standardized India preached so loudly these days. It is an India that lies hidden in each of us and is born anew in creative striving, ancient and new like no other.

In Paris, Raza worked hard on learning constructivism, one of the key elements of paintings in those years in the West. But he refused to imitate any modern master and reinvented his learning into a new kind of form to construct an un-constructible landscape. That is why his landscapes of those years were like dreams of cities, of houses, of moonlit nights. They are ethereal, as if woven in

the words of the Japanese Poet Kazuko Shiraishi, with 'threads of dreams and fibres of silence'. Raza was perhaps the first modern Indian painter to be recognized as a master in Paris and was awarded the prestigious Prix de la Critique (1956). He married the French artist Janine Mongillat in 1959 and lived and painted in Paris. His wife died of cancer in 2002 and after she was gone Raza decided to return to India (2010).

Raza's home in Paris was truly a refuge for Indian writers, filmmakers, painters visiting that charming city of art and literature. I remember phoning Raza Saheb sometime in the early nineties, on my first visit to Paris for the World Poetry festival. His first question was about my well being in Paris. His generosity was effortless and always gentle. He lived in a lovely old apartment of an ancient historical building, painting day and night, going out only when it became absolutely necessary. Along with colors and canvases all around his studio were books of contemporary Hindi poetry and of the Rilke. He remained close and intimate all his wonderful life to his two loves: painting and poetry. He had a special feeling for the sounds and imagery of Hindi poetry. While living in Paris he would come to India almost every year for one or two months, meet young artists and encouraging them to recognize their strong and weak points.

The early phase of Raza's painting were landscapes and cityscapes. The approach in these works was that of minimalist. All the inessentials are rigorously banished. This gave to his painting a strange poetic quality. That feel for the essential decided once and for all that Raza would paint what stirs beneath the surface. That lead him in later works to paint only colors so juxtaposed that they evoked the feeling of a particular landscape. His painting called Rajasthan is a limpid example of this. In this painting he did not paint the place called Rajasthan but that exquisite feeling-colors called Rajasthan. In the early seventies Raza came to his motif Bindu which marks his most celebrated phase. Raza's Bindu signifies not only the origin and end of all colors, but also the beginning of sound, the *Naad bindu*. It was as much philosophical as personal. In this phase of painting, Raza while touching upon colors' origins was also revisiting his childhood, the source and reference for his sense of colors unto his last. The very last phase of painting is for me the most enchanting. It began after Raza's return to live in India (2010)

after sixty wonderful years in Paris while keeping his Indian passport. Colors were given a free rein as never before. The immaculate technique that he had crafted over seventy years was almost given up. The spontaneous movements of his hands on canvas began to transcend geometric forms and colors began with each other a primal dialogue in the manner of rock paintings from a time beyond recall.

Raza Saheb exhibited of course all over the world and in almost all the leading art galleries of the world. Many honors came his way: Kalidas Samman, Padma Shree, Padma Vibhushan and Commandeur de la Legion d' Honneur. All that he had earned and possessed, Raza Saheb bequeathed to the foundation he set up with the help of his old friend Ashok Vajpeyi. Raza Saheb envisioned the Foundation as a resource to nurture and support all forms of creative arts: painting, sculpture, literature, music and the visual arts. His magnificent presence and stupendous artistic legacy would remain a source of inspiration for artists, writers, and filmmakers for generations to come. He lived to paint. During the last one year his time was more or less evenly split between his Delhi home and the hospital. His time at home was given almost entirely to painting. Raza one could see lived only to paint and restore our faith in the near divine solace and promise of art.