



art

The Evolution of Contemporary Art in Pakistan

by Naazish Ata-Ullah

THE APPROACH OF ALMOST A half century since Independence from the British provides us an opportunity to survey the spectrum of the visual arts in Pakistan with some degree of retrospection and insight. A complex, multi-layered canvas confronts us encompassing a myriad images, emotions, events and intellectual questions. I will attempt to narrate and comment on these in this paper.

The nationalist movement in art which gathered impetus at the turn of the century in Bengal was a very significant attempt at rejecting the yolk of colonialism while striving to attain some form of a national identity in art. Whether the movement successfully achieved this objective or not is a debatable issue. However, in my view, the post-independence period has been in many ways a perpetuation of the earlier struggle and thus the last fifty years reveal that consciously and most certainly at the sub-conscious level the search for identity is a serious pre-occupation with the practitioners of the visual arts in Pakistan.

While we recognise that primarily the intrinsic concern of every artist is contained in achieving a balance between form and content, we also know that the artist's environment stimulates his or her creativity to respond, amongst other things, to the society of which the artist is an integral part. Based on this observation we can state that the artist holds a mirror to society and thus the establishing of a social and political role for the artist has also been a matter of general concern in our recent history. However, I must emphasise that juxtaposed against the natural concerns of the artist, we in Pakistan, have experienced the strong arm of the State, especially during the course of three military take-overs, — dictating, patronising, rejecting and interfering. Therefore we have to look at not only the process of making but also the way in which art has been received and directed in Pakistan.

I will focus more pointedly on the most recent twenty years of our history which bear greater relevance to the current discussion. However, the first three post-independence decades will also be discussed as they are imperative for a deeper understanding.

The euphoria which should have come in the wake of Independence was marred by the trauma of brutal violence which accompanied the mass migration across the borders of the new states of India and Pakistan. The re-settlement of refugees who additionally suffered an even greater psychological trauma, cost a state of unease, insecurity and confusion all over the country. Moreover, the untimely death of the top leadership — both the Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan — added to the general chaos. The scenario in the arts was equally dismal in the city of Lahore which was, as it is today, the cultural capital of the western region, similar to Calcutta in the east. At Independence it was the centre of all forms of educational and cultural activity. A number of libraries, universities, colleges, two open-air theatres and at least twelve other theatres were located in Lahore. It was the centre of the film industry prior to Bombay and many stars including Noorjehan, Kamini Kaushal, Dev Anand, Dalip Kumar and Mohammed Rafi had worked there before Independence. Moreover the premier institutions of art production, the Mayo School of Arts and the Depart-

ment of Fine Art of Punjab University were also located there.

Independence brought confusion to most institutions in Lahore including its art schools and studios. The valuable archives of the Mayo School of Art were destroyed including its records, books and the works of its illustrious students; some of its ustads migrated to India. In an interview, the late Anna Molka Ahmed, former Head of the Fine Art department at the Punjab University remarked: "Immediately after Independence we were left without our teachers and most of our student body and we had to start from scratch". Division of assets between Pakistan and India resulted in the division of the famous collection of the Central Museum in Lahore between Lahore and Chandigarh. Source of cultural activity in the city, was locked and subsequently abandoned after it had been looted. Only a few of his sculptures were rescued to be later ensconced in the Lahore Museum. I am referring deliberately to these events in the early years of Pakistan to emphasise the period of chaos and upheaval which necessitated a return to order and the need to progress by way of defining new directions. Thus, the first decade of Pakistan is one in which new directions were given to the arts. I may bring to your notice that in these early years Abdul Rahman Chughtai and Ustad Allah Bakhsh in the west and Zainul Abedin in what is now Bangladesh were the most imposing figures on the art scene.

The Mayo School of Art, established in 1875, was primarily a professional school of design with a small department of fine art. It also ran a course for the training of architectural draughtsmen. By contrast the University of the Punjab's Department of Fine Art, although smaller in size, was more academic in its approach and concerned to a lesser degree in the training of professional practitioners. During the fifties, an era when the foundations of an industrial base for Pakistan were being laid, the Mayo School which was administered by the Department of Industries, was an ideal training ground for professionals required to meet the challenges of the newly emerging market. It was therefore decided in 1958 to upgrade the institution to a professional college level, to rename it the National College of Art, and to create three full-fledged departments of design, architecture and fine art. At this stage both Sheikh Ahmed and Shakir Ali, eminent painters, were on the faculty of the school. While the search was on for a suitable principal to head the institution an American, Professor Mark Sponenburgh, was selected and appointed from London. Two years earlier a Mr Sidney Spedding, an English sculptor, had also been employed as principal of the school. The point to emphasise is that the bureaucrats, victims of a 'post-colonial state of mind', preferred to employ one foreigner after another despite the presence of two very competent and respected Pakistani professionals. Consequently, a frustrated Sheikh Ahmed resigned and Shakir Ali, a more genial man, worked under Sponenburgh later succeeding him as Principal in 1963.

Meanwhile NCA graduates began to make their presence felt in the market and fulfilled the market demand with remarkable competence. Both men and women from the College could be found in advertising agencies, in television as designers, in textile mills, ceramic fac-

ories, the government printing press etc., etc. Qualified architects were also absorbed in the market and the fine artists set about establishing a reputation both nationally and internationally under the guidance and inspiration provided by Shakir Ali.

Although Chughtai and Allah Buksh were the most celebrated and successful artists in the fifties, it was their contemporary Shakir who pioneered the modern movement in Pakistani art. Shakir was trained in the European manner but his work resonated influences from his own visual tradition. Simplicity of line and form and a strong presence of colour dominated his paintings rendering them contemporary with a wider universal appeal. His images were inspired by a sensitivity to his paintings rendering them contemporary with a wider universal appeal. His images were inspired by a sensitivity to his own environment making the Bengal School sentimentality and nostalgia for the past in Chughtai and Ustad Allah Buksh's paintings obsolete. Unlike them there was no yearning for the past in this work; instead, while still mindful of his tradition, there was a celebration of the present. In the late fifties in Lahore an energetic and serious group of painters were working on similar themes, discussing intellectual issues and holding exhibitions. The group included the painters Safdar, Moyene Najmi, Hanif Ramay, Shemza, Ahmed Pervaz, and Ali Imam. Many performing artists and writers including Imtiaz Ali Taj and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, together with the painters and including Shakir Ali and Khalid Iqbal, met on a regular basis to discuss issues of mutual concern. Organised into a private body called the Lahore Arts Council they had their studios and a theatre on the premises of the current Alhambra Arts Complex in Lahore. Over a period of time and through constant State machinations the independent status of the Lahore Arts Council was forced to be taken over completely by the State thereby causing a complete transformation in its original form. Although an imposing structure, designed by the architect Neyyar Ali Dada, was constructed under the Martial Law Governor Jilani in Zia-ul-Haq's regime, State interference to the extent of banning of exhibitions, dance performances and staging of plays to the censorship of the same occurred which resulted in its boycott by many artists and performers. Also in more recent times the Alhambra Arts Complex has been used as a convention centre by whichever political party is in power.

Amongst some of the earliest attempts to visually explore an ideological identity, I refer back to painters from the Lahore Arts Council group who undertook experimentation into a contemporary rendition of calligraphy, traditionally considered to be the highest form of Islamic art. These explorations were purely motivated by aesthetic concerns unlike the later abuse of calligraphy which was promoted as 'modern' Pakistani art. Shakir's mural for the Punjab Public Library is an excellent example of this search as are the earlier works of Hanif Ramay, Shemza and Sadequain. But, it was Sadequain who became the torch-bearer for a phase of 'modern' calligraphic painting; a means of expression which began within the aesthetic domain but steadily deteriorated as it gained State patronage.

In 1957, Sadequain's first exhibition

was opened by Prime Minister Hussain Shaheed Shurawardy who personally promoted the talented young artist. He was sent to work in Paris where his paintings were greatly appreciated winning him a commission to illustrate Camus. Sadequain's Parisian sojourn culminated in a series of figurative paintings strongly inspired by traditional calligraphy. Strong, dark and angular forms loomed against the landscape in these works which I believe are amongst the best of Sadequain. When he returned, Pakistan was under its first military dictatorship and he became the most favoured of all artists of the Ayub Khan regime. He was commissioned to paint a mural for the new State Bank of Pakistan building in Karachi and a huge mural in the powerhouse building of Mangla Dam. On the basis of his calligraphy, many other state commissions followed including ones for Karachi Airport and for the Lahore Museum. His earlier work was mostly in a strong narrative mode reminiscent of the Latin American painters but his concern with calligraphy which persisted throughout his life sadly led to a gradual deterioration in his later work. These paintings were of no great artistic merit only a marble and perspex but significantly they became synonymous with State sponsored 'official art'. A similar situation prevailed in the realm of architecture. Pakistan is full of examples of architecture from the Raj period. Although we are severely critical of the British for transformations they caused in our indigenous tradition we must accept that in most cases they evolved an architecture which was more sensitive to the local climate and in some cases even to existing forms than most architecture produced in the post-colonial era. Some of the most appalling examples of architecture have mushroomed all over the country — many under state sponsorship. In the sixties, state-sponsorship was also extended to architects from abroad in the planning and development of the new capital Islamabad. There an imperialist style adorns the buildings of government which is totally alien both to Pakistani visual culture and to the surrounding landscape. To further confound the vision and interspersed between the concrete and the foliage (the city's only saving grace) are the 'Islamized' versions of architecture — a poor pastiche of a universally acknowledged great tradition. These buildings are again the outcome of state direction and can best be labelled 'Islamic kitch'. Such buildings are visible in every major city in Pakistan and are invariably financed by the State.

While summing up the first two decades of Pakistan we observe that there was not only a need to build new institutions but also a desire to find new directions which would reflect a national identity. The rise of individual artists such as Gulgee, Shakir Ali and Sadequain occurred in the absence of an explicit policy for the promotion of the arts. Hence the production of art was limited and it produced no definite social impact. A degree of state patronage was therefore extended to work which was perceived as representing a national identity whether it was found in the visual narratives created by Sadequain in his murals, or in the depiction of calligraphy which was also perceived as a symbol of Islamic identity.

State patronage and its active involvement in concrete terms was evi-

dent in the democratic period under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1972-1977). There was a resurgence of cultural complex was envisioned in the capital Islamabad with branches in the regional centres. Many institutions for the promotion of culture were established. These included NAFDEC the institute for film and drama, the PIA dance academy, the Lok Virsa, Music Research Cell, National Book Foundation, the National Puppet Theatre, the Academy of Letters and a body called the Pakistan National Council of the Arts for music, literature and the visual arts which had the poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz as its first Director General. Plans were also drawn up for a National Gallery which is currently under construction after two decades. In the field of art education, the National College of Arts was taken over by the Federal Ministry of Education and its staff and students were involved in major cultural projects. Zahir-ul-Akhlag designed a monument for the National Sports Complex in Islamabad and the College participated actively in a mass gymnastic display.

Not only did the State extend support to all the arts but also, in line with its populist rhetoric, attempted to bring art to the masses. The newly created institutions in particular were called upon to devise programmes to implement this policy. A number of artists responded to the new wave such as Ijaz-ul-Hasan, Bashir Mirza and younger painters. Due to the imposition of martial law in 1977 this period was short-lived. The end of democracy crippled most of these institutions were replaced. Many artists perceived as 'leftist' were marginalised whilst many other 'conformists' profited.

Of the periods of military rule in Pakistan, Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship (1977-1988) was the most oppressive for the arts. The process of 'Islamisation' meant direct State interference which resulted in the promotion and projection of artistically the most mundane and banal and the total lack of support for the most creative and dynamic work. The State's policies promoted calligraphy as the politically acceptable 'Islamic' art form and a burgeoning of the most ill-conceived and superficial examples of painting and sculpture such work extended to embassies abroad and even artists like Sadequain and Gulgee jumped onto the 'official' bandwagon compromising their critical faculties by a proliferation of the most profane examples of 'Islamic art'.

On this despondent note I would like to turn to the alternative art scene during Zia's dictatorship and the consequent development of the art scene generally. Prime Minister Bhutto was hanged in the month of April while preparation for the NCA's degree show was in progress. The group of final year students responded in violent protest with paintings depicting flesh, blood, hanged bodies, bolts and locks. Some professional artists reacted in a similar manner. Oppression produced its own reaction amongst artists both young and old. As the external environment appeared to be hostile to freedom of expression there followed many years of internalisation where a lot of work was executed with vigour, determination and social awareness. Most importantly a process of politicisation occurred amongst the artist community which resulted in a very dynamic and socially conscious output. Some of the most sophisticated paintings were pro-

duced in Pakistan during the eighties, in times when the State was actively interfering in the arts by the imposition of rules and regulations which were designed to curb the freedom of expression. The forces of obscurantism prevailed time and again beginning with the ransacking of Colin David's exhibition, held in his house, by members of the Jamiat-i-Tulaba. Iqbal Hussain's paintings of Hira Mandi (the 'red light' area in Lahore) were not allowed to be shown at the Alhambra Arts Complex in Lahore as they promoted 'vulgarity' and Salima Hashmi's work was taken down from the National Exhibition in 1979 as its content was 'political'. Jamal Shah's sculptures were also removed from an exhibition in Lahore as 'sculpture' was deemed un-Islamic Representatives of the Jamiat-i-Tulaba forced their way into the National College of Arts and smashed a 100 year old wooden screen in the Principal's office and the College was threatened with closure if the works of its students showed 'nudity'. The reaction to the forces of the state evoked a greater resolve to protest by the artist community which responded by depicting in its works the brutality and intolerance that had pervaded the society. Notable amongst artists of this genre are the painters Nagori, Qudus Mirza, Anwar Saeed and a host of women. Some of these painters chose a direct means of depiction whereas others were more indirect in their approach choosing the use of symbols and metaphors to communicate their ideas. This manner of painting not only enhanced their personal visual vocabulary but it also contributed positively to the general development of the medium in exciting new ways. These years created an environment where some artists such as Zahir-ul-Akhlag emerged with a remarkable synthesis of the tradition with the modern and this manner of intellectualism in painting also entered the domain of architecture in the work of Kamif Khan Muntaz.

Although there has been an increasing number of artists responding to the social and political environment since the 1980s it is the women artists who have emerged as the most significant force from this period — undaunted and powerful. Challenging the Law of Evidence imposed by Zia-ul-Haq, the fledgling Women's Action Forum took out a demonstration on the Mall Road, Lahore in 1983, which was broken up by a violent lathicharge. This was a turning point in the politicising of women generally and in the arts in particular — a position from which there has been a steady growth. Women artists have not only responded to oppressive laws and to human rights abuses through their work but have also played a leading role in the feminist struggle along with other women's organisations. I would like to show the work of a selected few to illustrate my point.

To conclude it can be said that the political and social awakening of the Bhutto years reached a turning point during the repressive decade under Zia-ul-Haq. In response, there was a distinct politicisation of the artist. The most socially relevant work was begun during this era and there has been no turning back since. The artist today is seriously concerned with the role and the relevance of his/her work in society. This paper was presented at the Fifth South Asia Dialogue organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue held in Rejendrapur, Bangladesh February 25-27 this year.

exhibitions

From the Pages of History

by Fayza Haq

TWO YOUNG ARTISTS STEPPED into the world of art in a big way with their solo exhibitions. One was Miratul Fatima Raka, who held her show at the Zainul Gallery, and the other was Laila Anjuman Ara Chhoty, who had her exhibition at the Alliance Francaise.

In Raka's "The Hunted" we see a development of a relief work from Mesopotamia. A lion is seen wounded with arrows. The surroundings are dramatically dark to the left and pale to the right. This oil paint has the lure of ancient carvings with the glow in the eyes and the snarl on the lips.

"Rowing, Rowing, Rowing" brings in the appeal of Egyptian wall paintings. It shows bare bodied men rowing an ancient Egyptian sailboat. Hieroglyphics at the back take the viewer to a culture and civilization centuries past.

"Searching" combines figures from the Iliad and local Bengali legends. The men are barebodied and wear loincloth. They have sleepy slanted eyes and short



hair. Their bodies are tawny coloured and each figure is clinging to a single rope. "Commencement" focuses on an ancient cave painting of a bison from

France. The animal is huge and overwhelming. The mysteries of the past are brought in by dark brown lines. Touches of vermilion are added according to the artist's fancy.

Raka's miniature work is fascinating too. "Women in our Society" are symbolised in a crushed Coca Cola tin. "There is our bua", for instance, who is abandoned by her husband after her first child. This is a common phenomenon in so many homes of the lower classes in our society," the artist says. The subject has been painted with great care. The red in the painting brings in the element of drama.

"Sinking of our Existence" is another symbolic piece. This is an abstract creation which shows a sinking boat. The river is brought in with strokes of blue, green and red. This shows that our existence is slowly deteriorating.

"Break Fall" is another miniature creation which depicts an accident. The vehicle is brought in a rectangle shape of orange while destruction and chaos

are shown in front with yellow squiggles on a brownish background.

When Raka paints it is usually after midnight when she listens to Rabindranagets. In her work she is influenced by Impressionists specially by Monet. At home Raka has been moved by Qayyum Chowdhury, who is a family friend. As a teenager, Samiran Chowdhury has great influence on her drawings. At 25 she is a student of MFA, Dhaka University, and a teacher at Narayananj Chitraloka Nektan. She says her family is very encouraging.

Chhoty, the other artist, has dipped her brush in water colour, and produced delightful Oriental art based creations with landscape surrounding her human characters. Chhoty too is indebted to her family for encouragement and support. She has recently completed her MFA degree.

Chhoty's "Lonely" has a delectable maiden in a soft sea-green sari, waiting under a tree. Her hair is long and she wears anklets. Green washes bring in



the surrounding forest.

Her "Peace" has, similarly, a woman clad in a rose-pink sari, nursing a white dove sitting under a tree. Influenced by El Greco, "Rest" has gypsy women with long limbs, resting in a clearing in a forest. Baskets of bangles are brought in. Bright colours and the Radha-Krishna theme has come in "Love" where one sees two seated figures.

"Victim" is a departure from Oriental themes. A woman's face is covered up by a spider's web. A man's foot steps on the woman's face. This symbolises women's low position in our society. The style, however, remains oriental.

Although there is nothing mind-boggling about either of the painters' works, yet it is heartening to see women artists taking a bold step to hold a solo show. Surely the artists, in time, will gain more maturity, given the opportunity. With exposure and experience, both the artists could contribute considerably to the Dhaka art scene.