

Present thoughts : A Journey For Peace Through My Paintings

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Foreword :

After the 26/11 terrorist attack in Mumbai, in 2008, nine art galleries of Kolkata jointly held an exhibition. It was entitled **Art Against Terrorism**. Fortunately, I too was among the invited artists. However, this was nothing new. Back in 2001, I had been shocked into silence viewing the live television images of the destruction of America's Twin Towers by a dastardly terroristic attack. To commemorate the first anniversary of the attack as Condemnation Day, on 11 September 2002 an exhibition was held both in Kolkata and Delhi and a large painting of mine was among the exhibits. Earlier, in 1992 the communal riot all over the land had its impact on my paintings. The same also came about during the infamous Gujarat riots. I actively took part in many exhibitions held in Kolkata recording our anguished condemnation of those.

However, this was when I was painting in the abstract style. Incidentally, I had achieved a reasonable degree of skill in drawing because of my rigorous academic training. So the realistic treatment of a subject never posed a problem to me. But somehow or other I felt a strong urge to strike out off the beaten track. What is the use of drawing anything that I can draw easily – I thought. Rather let me take some risk and see what would come out of that! After all doing a picture in the abstract manner without anything visually fixed and predetermined involved risks. It is like a hesitant journey along an unknown path. Broadly speaking, it is not out of conscious choice, but out of the unconscious or the subconscious that an abstract form is created. Let me confess that what I enjoyed was this travel along this risky path.

But a kind of change occurred when I made another large painting in 2009 (**Don't be scared, my child**) for the exhibition entitled **Art against Terrorism** drawn against the backdrop of the terroristic attack. There were many reasons for this. To start with, I wondered if at all I could express what I wanted to do merely through abstract forms? Besides is taking risks or private enjoyment as creator the only choice for an artist? Thirdly, even if in the tribunal of tomorrow a painting is regarded as aesthetically satisfactory if not extra-ordinary, what is its worth in today's society? Fourthly, while men are being butchered all the world over in their thousands and when no kind of visual art is capable of making any impact, how can abstract art provide any direction to men in their millions? Besides the errors of starving illiterate Indian citizens, who understand little of art, to those to whom "the full-moon is like a loaf of singed bread" (to quote from the Bengali

poet Sukanta Bhattacharyya's famous poem), what can the value of abstraction really be?

In these evil days sensitive people like artists ought to come forward as vanguards. These were the considerations which made me think anew. Films have always been a source of inspiration for my paintings. I turned my attention to them with a view to expressing in my paintings the new ideas that stirred within me. I particularly selected those films which had the Second World War for their background including the documentary films on Hitler. I saw for the second time **Schindler's List** by Steven Spielberg. I saw **Escape From Sobibor**, Directed by Jack Gold, and an Oliver Hirschbiegel's film **Downfall**, based on the book 'Inside Hitler's Bunker'. I surfed the internet and found out details about the concentration camps. So this kind of preliminary search was there behind the paintings. I have just mentioned. To my gratification, visitors were genuinely moved.

And then at the end of the exhibition a dilemma arose in me as a painter. I was at a loss to decide which way I should choose as I sought to move forward. On the one hand, it seemed that I should express my thoughts through closer ties to reality; and on the other hand it appeared that I was unable to stay away from the fun and enjoyment abstraction provided. Exposed to such a complex internal conflict I was not able to continue with my work. I suffered from acute frustration. At last this told on my health. As a result, I fell ill suffering from blood pressure and cardiac problems. My physician advised me to observe strict discipline and I was obliged to get back to my village residence and live there. In my Kolkata home I had so long been obliged to live alone. However my stay at my village residence for about two and a half months marked a new chapter in my life. I used to rise at dawn daily and would walk down the roads of my village. I used to walk past canals, marshes and fields and would be completely refreshed seeing water-hyacinths, creepers, shrubs, plants and leaves of edible herbs, green vegetables, etc. In course of time I was able to overcome my frustration and began to work on my paintings. Now it was creepers and vegetation that filled my canvases. I made arrangements for canvases, colors and other accessories to be brought from Kolkata to my village home by car. Paintings began to appear one by one. In spite of my having to stay at a remote village, thanks to the electronic media and newspapers, no news is out of reach these days. Headlines flash off my country's and West Bengal's news, especially that of political killings. These could not have helped making an impact on any sensitive mind. This was true of me as well. In my paintings now as a result, the apparently innocent creepers and leaves flared as though in protest against red terror. To speak frankly, I found out anew the buried artistic life of mine. The confusion which had continued for six months was there no more. Now I love paintings and paintings only. Although I returned to the city, the village life still attracts me. That is why whenever I get an opportunity to go back to my village, I do not let it slip through

my finger. The days as they roll by between the village and the city are again enjoyable.

Today's paintings and the path ahead :

I have already said that my short stint at my village home there has brought about a change in my paintings. My pictures revolve around plants, green leaves and creepers as seen during my stay in rural Bengal. But they are not merely pleasing natural scenes. There too terror creeps in between leaves, and their veins and layers. At times it may be seen as embracing the bamboo-fences by the side of the pond which once protected the sides from erosion. The fences are now torn apart, stricken by red terror. So is the scaffold for edible creepers for it too is under the clutches of terror. In a word, terror today exists everywhere – within homes, localities and villages. But the form is different. It is sometimes religious, sometimes casteist, sometimes political or the other. But somehow life still is not to be choked by the fear of terror. The fear has to be resisted as well. This is where Mahatma Gandhi for me has become relevant.

He showed the whole world the road to peace. We seemed all to have forgotten that violence cannot overcome violence; rather violence breeds violence. Having read a little about him, I have realized that the application of violence is self-defeating. This is why violence prevails all the world over. In this kind of overwhelmingly bad times it is evident that the philosophy of that peace-loving man should be followed. I have realized that any one side has to abjure violence and then someday the other side too will do so. Someday this spirit of tolerance from any part will spread, which alone can restore peace in the heart of this world. I am at present convinced that in today's world it is Mahatma Gandhi on the spirit he represents which will bravely go forward unarmed for peace in the face of any kind of adversity. In my paintings I have depicted that very messenger of peace caring little for dangers. He fearlessly goes forward alone, holding up a manifesto of peace. Often I have seen the Mahatma in black and white. It is the which made me draw his figures in black and white in my paintings as a visual 'quotation' of sorts. In fact, by representing the Mahatma I want to send a message of peace. Of course, there were and are numerous others who too were and are committed to peace. I have in mind to draw paintings about them also. But it requires deeper thought and studies. More and more paintings are to be drawn in the days to come.

The unification between the realism and the abstraction in my paintings

It is interesting that though I apply realism to my recent paintings, side by side abstraction also remains pervasive there. As I believe, it raises my visual concerns to an altogether different level. After all, till some time back my chosen method has been one centered round abstract practices. I have always been firm in my commitment to abstraction. It's good that I can still make use of it without compromising my ideas and their concrete visualization. Combining these two

methods poses a challenge. I am now, however, sure that on one hand my recourse to realism cum-naturalism is helping me to represent my visual text straightaway and, on the other, my spontaneous recourse to abstract forms which have so far been very frequent in my work has lent depth to my recent work. At the same time. I believe that the combination of the two apparently contradictory modes, though tough, has lent a unique quality to my artistic journey.

As it happens, now I am also thinking of how to make my artistic journey more varied-that's the challenge I am up against. It calls for more time, so that I may grapple successfully with the task ahead of me. Unfortunately, I am compelled to take up commissioned jobs so as to meet my daily needs, and the expenses creative work involves. This places heavy demands, drastically curtailing the time I could otherwise have devoted to my creative work. Over and above this is the grave global economic crisis which has further aggravated the plight of struggling artists like me. The sale of my paintings has never been high, currently it has now come down to zero. The challenge in terms of creative practice in itself poses difficulty-all the more so because the paintings are generally large in size. Beside at present I am so much in love with the country surroundings that I try always to stay in my village home, but that kind of life style is not without difficulties its own. There is no commissioned job, no sale of paintings, hence practically no earnings.

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