

M F HUSAIN

A Victim of Intolerance

Ram Puniyani

ON 9 JUNE 2011, M F HUSAIN breathed his last in a London Hospital, and was later buried in the cemetery in London as per his wish that he should be buried at a place of his death. The most celebrated painter of India, more Indian than any of his detractors died away from his home, due to self-imposed exile. This self-imposed exile was due to the threats of Hindu fundamentalists. The renowned painter called by many as Picasso of India, had the fate similar to that of Picasso, who also went into self-exile in the regime of Fascist Franco of Spain.

M F Husain's work spanned a long period, evolving with time and deeply rooted in the rich traditions of India, plural, diverse Hinduism. He was confronted as to why he does not pick up Islamic motifs for his work to which he replied that Islam has Calligraphy alone and human figures are not drawn in Islamic tradition. He came more into the news from the decade of 1980s, with the rise of sectarian politics, as the intolerant Hindutva groups started attacking his painting exhibitions regularly. The allegation was that he is hurting the sensibilities of Hindus, and is doing it deliberately as he is a Muslim. He was abused for painting Hindu Goddesses like Sarswati, Durga, Draupadi and the one titled Bharat Mata in nude. Interestingly some of these paintings were done in 1970s or so. With the rise of the movement for Ram Temple the Hindu Fundamentalist forces became more assertive, the intolerance grew in the society, many a magazine and newspaper stated fanning the fire of 'hurting our sentiments' and that's when the followers of VHP, Bajrang Dal and Shiv Sena started attacking Husain's exhibition, his Gufa in Ahmadabad, SAHMAT painting exhibition and so.

Later these communal forces went on filing case after case against him to harass him. The Courts ruled in Husain's favour saying that his paintings are not promoting enmity between communities in any way and that he is well within the limits of his artistic freedom. Husain by this time was quiet old, he was offered the security by the state but he declined to be imprisoned in the cordon of security and decided to take the citizenship in Qatar to continue his work in his own uninterrupted way, while maintaining that the Passport is a piece of paper and he remains an Indian at heart. He also missed India but it was a strong choice, to do the work in an uninterrupted way or to face the physical and mental wrath of the Hindu fundamentalists. As such he was not spared by Muslim Fundamentalists also, who had objected to his film, 'Meenaxi: A Tale of Three Cities' on the charge that it blasphemes Koran.

As such Husain probably represents the best of Indian syncretic traditions and that too his rooting in Hindu mythology and culture may be much deeper than those who kept attacking him. He was born in the Maharashtrian town of Pandharpur; a place of pilgrimage for the Warkari's the followers of great Marathi Saint Tukaram. He belongs to Sulaimani sect of Shias, whose some practices are like Hindus and they also believe in the theory of reincarnation. During his childhood years he was very impressed by the staging of Ramlila and along with his Hindu friends used to enact it. He also went to study the Valmiki and Tulsidas versions of Ramayana. His quest for understanding the society led him to the study and discussion of Gita, Puranas and other spiritual texts. His rooting in liberal Hindu culture, not the Brahmanical variety, was very deep. One example one can glean from the information card which he designed for telling people about his daughter Raeesa's marriage, who did not want any ceremonies. His card showed Parvati sitting on the thigh of Lord Shiv with Shiva's hands on Parvati's breast. Husain regarded this union as the first marriage in the cosmos.

When he was in Hyderabad, Ram Manohar Lohia suggested to him to paint Ramayana. Husain was broke at that time, but he undertook this job seriously and drew 150 canvases around Ramayana mythology over a period of eight years. He also used to discuss with the Pundits of Kashi on the themes when drawing this Hindu epic. He regards Ganesha as one of the figures with a delightful form, a brilliant material to draw and generally before beginning on a large painting first used to draw Ganesha. The major criticism against him was and is definitely politically motivated. Being a Muslim and drawing these motifs so boldly was unacceptable to the offshoots of Sangh Parivar. As such the charge that nudity is an insult to Hindu Goddesses does not hold water as Husain pointed out that Nudity is a metaphor for purity in Hindu mythology. The example of Khajuraho cannot be dismissed on the ground that people wanted to increase the population so these were drawn, and were otherwise of no consequence to Hindu culture. As such Khajuraho paintings were expression of the prevalent culture. The painting or any other work of art has to be seen in the context of the artist and the cultural rooting of the work. Nudity can express vulgarity as well as purity, and that's where the fundamentalists of all variety show their intolerance to the extreme.

The rise of fundamentalism for various reasons has exiled the creative people, like Tasleema Nasreen, Salman Rushdi and tormented the likes of Vijay Tendulkar and Deepa Mehta in recent times. The case of Husain is a bit more unique, as here is an artist whose work on Hindu iconography is insurmountable, one who is deeply rooted in the deeper spirit of broad Hindu culture, still he has been hounded by both varieties of fundamentalists. All this has taken place while the other political formations have been so ineffectual in protecting him, creating an atmosphere where the creative people can undertake their work without any fear or intimidation. While the Hindutva party has been the blatant opponent of his work the other parties have done precious little for protecting the maestro. □