



This long-due book on Nagori can meaningfully communicate the ideas and images of an important artist of our era

By Quddus Mirza

"Just give me the name of any writer in human history who was not political. All of us are political, even if we don't know that we are political."

— Eduardo Galeano

One agrees with the South American author, but as some people are more equal than others, so some writers and artists are more political than others. Among them is A. R. Nagori, who has been addressing socio-political matters in his work. During the worst period of our political history, his work was a comment on as well as a form of protest against the prevailing situation. These canvasses, exhibited at private galleries, often invited the wrath of the state authorities. Yet he continued to paint what he liked and considered it the duty of a committed artist. To this day he remains one of the most prominent Pakistani painters, who deals in his art with issues of social structure, political suppression and religious bigotry.

Along with painting, Nagori has been active in word — through his writings and talks in seminars and conferences. Like his work in the realm of the visual arts, his words also affirm his position as a politically aware person. His ideas and uncompromising approach bring out the rebel in him, yet at the same time clarity of thought and eloquent speech mark his mastery in matters of form and content. His paintings, too, have a fine balance of both these elements.

A recent publication, 'Nagori: Voice of Conscience' offers insight to the personality and art of this painter. Written by Amber Romasa and a joint production of FOMMA and Oxford University Press, the book is the latest in FOMMA's project of a series of monographs on Pakistani artists. Like other volumes in the series, this book includes pictures of the artist and reproductions of his work.

Amber begins her preface with the question whether it is essential to know the artist in order to appreciate his work — or: can a creative individual be separated from his output? She discusses reasons for writing the book on Nagori, who,



Portrait of a protest



artist

"due to ill health, is no longer as prolific as he used to be", after many years of teaching and painting. In a way the book is an attempt to understand his ideas, to identify his imagery and to get a glimpse into his personal life.

Looking at his works from various periods (printed in the book) it becomes relevant to know the details of his childhood, early years and his training as an artist. In fact his experiences as a child were significant in formulating his vision as a creative individual. Hence the time he spent in the company of sages and saints, taking lessons in Hindi, and his familiarity with Hindu myths and rituals (to the extent of participation in these events as a kid) contributed to his multicultural world view. This is reflected in his works from the later years, which have recurring symbols and figures of Indian divinities, like Hanuman and Saraswati (in the paintings, 'Jai Bajrang' and 'Falling Saraswati', both from 1993).

Not only Hindu imagery, but references to a wide range of symbols can be seen in his

paintings. 'Odalisque', 'Eve' and 'Olympia' appear in his canvasses along with the ordinary women of Sindh, especially from Thar.

This multiplicity of images shows the artist's involvement in diverse concepts and disciplines, something which is a result of his wide ranging interests — Sufi poetry, history, literature, politics, war and philosophy. His studies in these fields prove that Nagori approaches his subject matter not in a sentimental way, but with a deep understanding of class divisions, social structures and the process of history. A certain analytical approach — a feature not evident in the work of several other artists' who attempt similar themes — may be instrumental in preventing his canvasses from being illustrative exercises.

And perhaps due to this, his work remains relevant; because Nagori probes the institutions of power and challenges the unjust demarcation of people in our society. In doing so, one witnesses the change in his approach and style in paintings from various

phases (included in the book), beginning with 'The Women of Dhanmandi, Dacca', from 1965, to the latest, 'Tharri Landscape 3', painted in 2004, which was exhibited in his last show, 'Return to Sphinx', held at the VM Gallery in Karachi.

The book on Nagori highlights his contributions towards art education — his years at the University of Sindh and his role in devising art curriculum. His formative years at the University of Punjab are also mentioned, with a description of his entry and his studies at the Department of Fine Arts. The painter's recollections about his encounter with Anna Molka Ahmed as well as his praise for Prof Khalid Iqbal form the most interesting part of the book. It provides the closer accounts of some of the important personalities of our art. Nagori expresses his admiration for the work and teaching methods of his mentor, Khalid Iqbal. This shows that if a painter appreciates another artist, it is not necessary that both work in a similar manner or that one follow the other. People who appear to be

inspired by a master may not have anything to share with him because, apart from the surface similarities, they are incapable of having identical sensitivities to their materials or subject matter. This is true of many landscape painters influenced by Khalid Iqbal.

Besides the artworks and an impressive write-up on A. R. Nagori, the book contains a number of photographs in sepia. All of these show the painter in the studio or among family, friends and contemporaries. These pictures span his life from his student days till recent times — Nagori sitting on a sofa at his home in 2005. Each of these pictures, apart from the apparent scene and people, reveals something extra: The loneliness of the painter. He appears alone even in a group of friends. However in this he is not unique, many artists are, at heart, lonely individuals, for whom artmaking is a way of countering sense of solitude. It seems that for Nagori not only the act of painting, but the choice of subject is a means to reach of his self and connect with others.