

# Rebel with a cause

Asif Noorani

**N**agori was in a way born a little too late. Had he come to this world 15 years earlier, he would have been in the forefront of the Progressive Movement in Art, which was formed by the likes of Haider Raza, Souza and M.F. Hussain. He too believes that art should serve a purpose and he doesn't subscribe to the art-for-art's-sake doctrine. Nagori is frank to the point of being blunt. He is to the three seniors what Sahir Ludhianvi was to Faiz. Both of them protested against injustice and inequality but Sahir was blunt (like Habib Jalib) and sometimes not as subtle as Faiz. But to be fair to Nagori, one can say he doesn't mince his words.

Take a look at his paintings reproduced in the slim volume *Nagori: Voice of Conscience* by Amber Romasa and you will notice that his imagery is daring and colours strident. He

traces his life from his birth in 1938 and the enriching experience that the forests and flowers had on his psyche and paintings alike. His father was a forest official in Junagadh State and the posting gave the son the opportunity to come close to nature and assimilate it. He owes his love for nature and his fascination for humanism to his father and the pleasure of learning to his mother.

When the family moved to Mirpur Sakro in lower Sindh, he got a chance to study the lives of the Mohana fishermen, whose lifestyle he drew with charcoal on wrapping papers. For his matric he went to Hyderabad where he got the opportunity to play his favourite game — cricket, at club level on Sundays. According to Romasa, Nagori felt that the turning point in his life came when he met Syed Nayab Hussain, a teacher of English literature, a Shakespearean scholar and a playwright. He “changed Nagori's vision overnight by reading out Eric Newton's essay *The Nature of the Arts, and Art and Amateur* by J.A. Spender.” Syed also arranged an exhibition of the sketches that Nagori had made and later advised him to seek admission at the National College of Arts. Nagori took the advice seriously and went to Lahore, where instead of going to the NCA he enrolled at the Fine Arts Department of the University of Punjab. Those who influenced his decision were Prof Khalid Iqbal, his ‘friend, philosopher and guide’ and the eminent artist cum educator — Anna Molka Ahmed, who took Nagori under her wing. She is described as ‘Stalin without moustaches’ by Nagori. Behind her rough exterior was a person who was very keen to promote art education in the country and backed budding artists to the hilt.

Thanks to her, his tuition fees were waived and he didn't even have to pay for his boarding and lodging. Ahmed first sent him to the Government College hostel but sharing the room with three students was not acceptable to him. She then got him better accommodation at the Dyal Singh College hostel. Nagori was later awarded Rs 50 as scholarship by SEATO (the now defunct South East Asian Treaty Organisation, a counterpart of NATO in Asia).

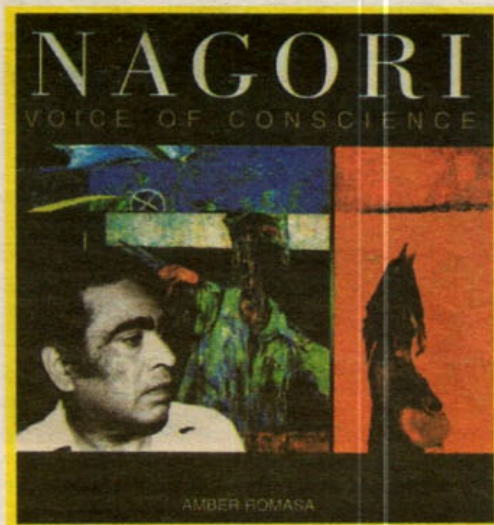
He got the opportunity to visit what was then East Pakistan and apart from Dacca, he went to Chittagong and the lush green Cox's Bazaar. His study of the people - poor and downtrodden - fired him with a renewed zeal to portray the ugly realities of life.

Prof Khalid Iqbal and Anna Molka Ahmed infused in him the passion for art education, which found expression in his setting up of the Fine Arts Department in the University of Sindh, an assignment he has enjoyed, but not as much as the days he spent in Lahore, which he called “the best period” of his life. His most enriching moments were the ones when he met and interacted with artists, art teachers, poets and intellectuals.

None could have summed up Nagori's art as eloquently as Dr Marcella Nessom (page 24) who calls him “one of the most dynamic and significant forces in the twentieth century painting in Pakistan.”

A word about FOMMA, which is doing a commendable job in documenting Pakistani artists: in less than four years, it has brought out monographs on four artists. The earlier three were on Ali Imam, Zubeida Agha and Laila Shahzada. The artists' paintings have been faithfully reproduced in volumes which enjoy excellent production value.

The monograph on Nagori has a number of photographs from the artist's personal album and thanks to skilful use of photoshop the results are excellent.



***Nagori: Voice of Conscience* by Amber Romasa. Published by FOMMA and OUP, Karachi  
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mocks, protests, satirises, condemns and laments at the cruelty, injustice, selfishness and inconsideration that has permeated into the fabric of our society. For instance, in *Target* he paints the plight of the common men in rural Sindh, who are looted by the dacoits, and who also have to face the wrath of the army which burns the forests to flush out the dacoits.

Nagori is articulate in highlighting the unjust treatment meted out to women in our society and one can't think of any male painter in Pakistan who has picked up cudgels on behalf of women with a vengeance.

Nagori calls the spade a spade and he does that not only through his paint brush but also in his writings and his lectures. The publication, under review, published by FOMMA (Foundation of Museum of Modern Art) and distributed by Oxford University Press, Karachi, opens a window to the man and his art.

His Thar paintings are colourful. He finds colour where none exists. If you visit Thar you will find it monochromatic. There is dull brown all over, except in the women's apparels. The landscape remains brown year after year, except one rare year when it rains, and turns the entire area green, as it is these days. But, Nagori, who is alive to the harsh existence of the Tharis, paints the people and the land colourful perhaps because he is in love with both.

Amber Romasa seems to have done a series of interviews with the painter for it seems it is Nagori and not the author who is writing. She