

A. R. NAGORI

VOICE OF CONSCIENCE BY AMBER ROMASA

Marjorie Husain

I very much enjoyed reading a slim volume on artist A. R. Nagori, recently published by OUP and FOMMA, authored by the artist's daughter, Amber Romasa titled, *Nagori: Voice of Conscience*. One hears the voice of the subject on every page as one is given a brief but fascinating insight into his early life leading to the Punjab University Fine Arts Department. I have known Nagori since the seventies, and in my mind's eye he was always clothed in chain-mail, seated astride a bannered powerful horse, flag flying.

A fine draftsman and colourist, he is an artist who could have acquired fame and pelf, but Nagori has, from the beginning, chosen to use his art for his lifelong, socio-political concerns, continuously engaged in confrontations with the powers that be. He was trained as a muralist but in exhibitions throughout the years, for economic reasons the artist has been obliged to paint small, dazzling artworks that appeared as banners on the field of battle.

Amber, a published writer on numerous subjects including art, begins the preface referring to the dance of Lord Shiva. One finds the demon Apasmara Purusha, "symbolic of man's inertia and ignorance", crushed, and further on, she mentions various masters of art history and one is aware that this is the essence of Nagori captured by the writer. Born into a scholastically inclined, 'fairly religious' family, the artist imbibed a knowledge of history and the 'written word' from his mother, and a love and appreciation of Nature from his forest officer father. Nagori recalls forays into the Gir jungle, the legends and stories narrated by people he met, and how, even at an early age, he queried the various philosophies encountered.

As an adolescent in Sindh, he swam with his Mohana friends, catching fish in his bare hands, read voraciously and began to appreciate art. He records the first appreciation he received at this time for charcoal sketches drawn on brown paper. Nagori's experience appears to have been a rich tapestry of diverse people from every walk of life. We see him reading, playing cricket for his school, taking admission in the newly opened Sindh College of Commerce, Hyderabad, and in 1958, receiving top honours for Painting in the All-Pakistan Inter-Collegiate competition. Then the excitement of reaching Lahore, and taking admission first from NCA, then a

chance encounter with Khalid Iqbal, caused him to join the Punjab University department instead. Nagori loved Lahore, and the people he met and revered. Khalid, Anna Molka, Hafeez Sheikh, Sufi Tabassum, Faiz Ahmed Faiz... the list is long as Nagori remembers those he considered his artistic and intellectual mentors. Eventually Nagori fulfilled Anna Molka Ahmed's desire that he should propagate Art Education in Sindh, when in 1970, he established the Fine Arts Department of Sindh University.

Always a rebel, one remembers the collection of anti-martial law paintings that expressed his anger in what he saw as the cruelty and injustice being meted out to the people of Sindh. Painted over a period of four years, they were shown at the Indus Gallery in 1986, followed by other exhibitions on thematic socio-political themes. Amber records that, 'Protest was in Nagori's character since the student politics of the sixties. In Nagori's words: "I participated against the University Ordinance in 1958 and took part in anti One-Unit rallies in Hyderabad. In Lahore I partook in the Union election and defeated the rightists at Punjab University..." Nagori continued to protest against numerous wrongs he observed in his surroundings, and on a universal platform about world threatening issues.

Nagori permits us to know what he considers is relevant to his life and his work. Finally Amber records the artist's feelings and conclusion, now that he has declared he will no longer exhibit his work in public exhibitions. In answer he refers to Sisyphus of Greek mythology, condemned to forever pushing a stone up a steep mountain-side, to have it reach the top to fall once more, and he owns that he knows that the burden will have to be picked up again, the struggle continued by others.

"So long as there are political wrongs to be righted, art has to participate in the popular development of an attitude that leads to a better society. If one is insensitive to the people around, then art is meaningless, existence is meaningless."

I read the book in one sitting, fascinated by the unusual and colourful life of a very fine artist and man. Congratulations to Amber Romasa for an excellent book on her father. I look forward to reading more of her work. ♦

