

'Art under dictatorship'

By A. R. Nagori

The role of art in a society specially under the dictatorship has been so enormous in the history of art that venue and time restricts me to elaborate, in its broader perspective, therefore, instead of any scholarly discourse, I confine myself to my country and present my views in an artist's sketchy manner.

Broadly speaking, in visual art, some artists are interested in solving the problems of style and techniques while others use style and technique to express their social and political views and in the process undertake "artistic responsibility". For them art does not exist merely to entertain and gratify the senses only. It plays a role in the improvement of our collective existence. They argue that, so long as there are socio-political wrongs to be righted and as long as an unjust and ugly condition require change, art must participate through visual education and motivate people's attitude which can lead eventually to awareness for better society.

Dictatorship enhances the urge. Environment and personnel psychic factor also affects artistic output. I, as an artist, while living in north, in a posh locality and amongst the elite at Lahore, Pindi and Peshawar, used to paint occasional Landscapes and largely figure compositions of voluptuous buxom belles. During student days, I had earned reputation as painter of attractive young ladies in Lahore. Besides sensual nudes in blues and pink, rivalled by Colin David only, who was my contemporary at the Punjab Varsity. While in Sindh, events took over me and I reacted to life and reality around me and earned the distinction of being first painter in the sub-continent to be censored. While non civilian dictator tried to curb my freedom of expression, Civilian dictators curbed my freedom of movement, by not allowing me to go abroad. Here I acknowledge Mr Ali Imami's help in arranging my solos at Indus Gallery and late G.N. Mansuri of Dawn and the Federation Union of Journalists who defied state sanction and sponsored exhibition of my works in 1982 at Islamabad.

Surely everyone else, has his or her reasons to keep aloof from the masses. Probably others wanted to go for higher values and sublime or aesthetics that I missed in my visual surrounding experience and expression, resulted from seeing terror let loose in the province of Sindh, since early 80's. Those unmoved by ghastly events, too are artists indeed, as we have other professionals, such as lawyers, in words of a columnist, "all brothers in law." Some prefer collaboration with an authoritarian regime and discovers 'Doctrine of Necessity', others object to amendments and refuse to take oath as judges. One gets kicked-up other gets kicked-out. Some get lucrative assignments as legal advisors for illegal activities, others prefer to join Human Rights and fight for the cause of down-trodden. Artists in Pakistan had similar choices and challenges. Who chose what, it is better to leave the question unanswered. If collaborator, is a harsh word, with what other name be described that horrific Calligraphic fever and diahorrea turned epidemic boosted by Marghala Morons who arranged wagons for ca-

sualties and carriage driven down the Indus by Ghori charya veer, Deshan da Raja, the Indus Person of the Indus Saga.

Just to please ruling junta and strengthening exploitation of religion by the general, doyen of calligraphy in Pakistan, claimed, Allah guided his hand, while in India, he did erotic couple rendered in Kufic, for that was infidel's land, love-making was permissive on Juhu Beach as Lord Krishna, not the General was to be pleased a la Khajuraru....

During high noon Martial Law, prominent artists were seen, with tapes in their hand, measuring walls and messing around officer's messes in cantonments — the only place of peace and tranquility.

We, in Pakistan, experienced authoritarianism early on, for us it is Hobson's choice in opting for lesser evil, Dictators. The Civil or the Uncivil. Lately I was corrected that uncivil was more civil and less ruthless than what one experienced from the civil. Specially in matters of tolerance and freedom of expression.

I had my first brushing with dictatorship during the Black garden rule in Lahore. I was a lecturer at the Punjab University in 1964-65. I wrote an article on role of art in the developing world.

Somewhere, I had mentioned Karachi University's inability to understand art's economic and industrial role, or arts as communication that was even understood and used by Dr. Gobbles in Germany and by our own born again faithful, Gobbles of Pakistan, who skilfully misused arts and culture, while heading the Disinformation cell. Dictator was presented as saviour and benevolent, propaganda unleashed presented, 'Decade of Decadence' as 'Decade of Reforms', artists participated wholeheartedly. Nationalisation of press was followed by the delivery of mid-named PNCA, Pakistan National Council of The Arts, a subsidy of Disinformation cell and a Ministry called anti-culture, headed by men of agriculture who saw to it that art and culture agree. Poet Faiz left PNCA in its ugly infancy, he soon realised futility of his presence as decoy heading decoy. Ministry's and PNCA's achievements were witnessed as pageantry on parade grounds, held on national days, in floating of culture, Art and artists, along with horse and cattle, lead by breeders from Jhang, Multan and Remount Depots, marching past to martial tunes, band and wagons, saluting the generals and culminating at musical sires with *Bara Khama* at Pindi cantonment, where CMLA President freely mixed up with plate-in-hand artists and sermoned to paint Islamic ideology that he was champion of... "Sensitive" artists were blessed with commissions, sharing seekhs and kabab. One leading portrait painter of Lahore presented Zia's portrait to Zia, the General with rosy cheeks, painted from his retouched photograph. Painter was awarded Pride of Performance, other presented "Allah" in calligraphy and recited his spiritual dream in which Allama Iqbal had told him to convey his greeting to *Marde-Momin* CMLA, for his Islamisation in the Republic. One did not visualise Allama's torment in his grave, but General *Sahib* was seen visibly pleased, the artist was given commission for Iqbal Memorial and in Hadya, the Pride of Performance as token

gratis. Once chronic landscape painter, at Islamabad, he deviated from his genre and painted calligraphy for one exhibition. But his claim for Pride of Performance was verified by another General *Sahib* and was dully awarded.

In my ignorance, I had counted number of artists in Pakistan, on my finger tips, it was on my refusal to then DG, PNCA for Portrait painting for President House, I was informed by him that there are three hundred painters already submitted 300 portraits. Artists from all over country out raced each other for painting portraits in *sherwani*, only then I realised, we have second line of defenders of ideology in such a motivated army of artists. As enough was not enough, in the evening, leading portrait painter appeared on National Idiot Box, and disclosed that he had corrected his masterpiece, grotesque visage in *sherwani*, as suggested by the General, implying that the General had an eye for art that people wrongly regarded abnormal.

During our worst dictatorship days, the significant art form came from sadly neglected performing art groups — the theatre group led by Ali Ahmed and couple of Aslams, Imran and Azhar, joined in by enlightened director, Goethe Institute, Dr Peter Hoeschle, Grips and Brecht plays were excellently adapted to local situation. While in Lahore, Madiha's *Ajoka and Lok Raha*, 'Punjab group' provided solace that "all is not lost." Jamil Dehlavi, Mushtaq Gazder gave films of class and commitment. One wished visual art too had such a matching example. On the contrary, by and large, our painters' role has been of colossal indifference and apathy.

Art in Pakistan is a tale of two cities. One prefer City Escapes, while others stubbornly anchored to Landscapes minus people. In between, some artists cashed Foreign Office re-lashed exhibitions on contracts such as on Afghanistan, Bosnia and Kashmir etc. Through their media-hyped image, and pending visa at Indian Consulate, leading artists and teachers sold their 'Jehad' under fake names of their *Talibans*. Art-corruption in pipeline. Our "sensitive" artists do have contributed in making Pakistan the second most corrupted country of the world. As a habit, we must call in question every judgement. Our vitae qualified us for the top slot, never mind the disgrace to the "Land of the pures", so long as there was a Gold-in the pure.

Elsewhere, if there were Nepolians, there were David, Gericault, Delacroix and Courbet. Germany gave us Max Beckmann, Grosz, Kathy Kollwitz and Modershon Becker. Along with Hitler's rise, Germany produced New Objectivity and anti-Militarist art, Franco motivated Guernica, and Mexican Fascists faced Rivera Sequiros and Orazco.

I conclude by quoting Bernard Shaw: "the reasonable man adapts himself to the world, the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself, therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man." How many unreasonables we had? Verdict I leave to the audience.

(A paper read by A. R. Nagori at the seminar "Art Under Dictatorship", at Goethe Institute, Karachi)