

# INDIA'S NEO-TANTRISTS

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G . R . S A N T O S H • B I R E N D E

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INDIA'S NEO-TANTRISTS: G. R. Santosh • Biren De

March 2017

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PRINT: Archana Advertising Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi

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Front cover: Biren De, *April '74*, oil on canvas, 1974

Back cover: G. R. Santosh, *Untitled*, oil on paper, 1955

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## FROM CUBISM TO RITUAL ABSTRACTION

*India's engagement with a new language of abstraction*

Not all abstract artists have been predisposed towards the non-figurative, and in India, especially, the struggle towards the non-representational has not been an easy one. Even though classical art has relied on the use of symbols as an important act of portraiture, or to denote a certain historicity, the aesthetic has been guided by and towards the narrative, which in turn has relied on the figurative as an essential component for the telling of its cultural stories, the epics as well as folk tales, narrations from history or the contemporary. It is this that has guided the traditional schools of art, and specifically of painting and sculpture.

In India, disruptions occurred with colonial trade and, later, rule, as a result of which Western art practices began to flourish and take root, replacing the indigenous idioms. Though these did not survive for long, the creation of art schools and the rigours of Western art training caused a move away from what was accepted as Indian to a more hybrid style that became a pastiche of the Western and Indian. The formation of a number of art collectives, fuelled by the freedom struggle and a search for vernacular values, led to a deliberation and seeking of solutions that mirrored the concerns of local artists as well as movements that

had been birthed in the West. The result was a richness of languages and practices within the art trope that have nurtured styles and techniques, content as well as context, with its own perspective and uniqueness, following international trends but also resolving local concerns with solutions, lending distinctiveness to our understanding of Indian modernism.

Understandably, the first of these movements away from the rigid norms of academic realism looked to and romanticised the past, and was applauded for its 'revivalism', but later drives moved away from such confines. As India progressed towards art practices that linked to a global art language, it did so conscious of finding answers within its own traditions and roots. This enriched the artistic journey further, and expressionism as well as cubism became part of the Indian search for indigenous expression.

While several artists from the 1950s onwards turned towards expressionism as their natural recourse or choice of language, cubism and its associated dissonance or disruption found favour in a uniquely Indian manner of evolving modern art. Artists disrupted the pictorial space



to divide it into distorted planes, but with the awareness that its extreme conclusion would find acceptance in India difficult. Artists, conscious also of Indian aesthetic values, preferred gently curving lines, something that drew both art makers as well as art-lovers to its lilting cadences in the mid-twentieth century.

It was around this time too that abstraction as a genre began to pick up pace, a period when a large number of modernists in the country felt emboldened enough to shed the figurative in its favour. Ram Kumar, an associate member of the Progressive Artists' Group, widely recognised for his social concerns and for building his figures in a linear, Amedeo Modigliani-like manner, struggled for a few years to shed the tramps or other dispossessed, or at least marginalised, people on the fringes of society, to almost exclusively paint in the abstract style, finding his muse in the crowded pilgrim city of Banaras. That Ram Kumar could eliminate the surging masses from his rendition of Banaras was a considerable feat, but was not without precedent. Rabindranath Tagore, poet, writer and philosopher, removed figures from his landscapes too, and even now, Manu Parekh, who devotes his considerable



Like several other noted abstractionists, the Indian modernist S. H. Raza began with expressive, European-style watercolour landscapes of Indian streets and panoramic views (*above, left*) before he moved to a period of gestural abstraction, which itself eventually gave way to his abiding exploration of esoteric concepts and the pictorial form of the *bindu* (*above*)





Ram Kumar moved from his early work with the figure placed in the city (left) towards abstraction that reflect on earth forms represented through planar wedges of pigment (top)

energies as a painter of Banaras, too works with the absence of the human from his panoramas of the city.

H. A. Gade, another member of the Progressives, also shed the figurative in favour of the abstract, and came to be highly regarded as a colourist. But it was S. H. Raza, even though not a figurative artist – he was known for his impressionistic landscapes and cityscapes where the human formed a part of the painting but rarely its exclusive subject – who went on to find fame based in Paris, first as an abstract landscapist in the European tradition, and later as a geometrical abstractionist in the *tantra* tradition in a manner similar to the two artists whose works are under consideration in this exhibition. Nor was this unusual, for other artists who are closely associated with the abstract began their careers with the figurative, among them V. S. Gaitonde and Jeram Patel. But in at least a few cases, the reverse held true as well. Krishen Khanna was drawn to the abstract at an early point in his career, which he renounced in favour of the figurative; and Himmat Shah, who is most associated with his terracotta sculptures of Heads, was once known only as an abstractionist by way of burnt paper collages and other found objects.

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### THE NEO-TANTRISTS

#### G. R. Santosh (1929-97) and Biren De (1926-2011)

Gulam Rasool was a self-taught Muslim artist from Srinagar, Kashmir, whose marriage to a Hindu lady caused an uproar in the valley, following which he took his wife's first name as his surname – henceforth known as G. R. Santosh. The feminist artist's watercolour landscapes were seen by the artist S. H. Raza, who suggested he be sent to study under N. S. Bendre in Baroda. Bendre was a figurative artist in the pointillist tradition, and under his guidance, Santosh blossomed as a figurative artist, painting

in the Cubist style that was popular in the Fifties and Sixties in the subcontinent with its distinctive lyrical curves and dips.

Santosh may have continued to paint thus but for a trip to the holy pilgrimage of Amarnath in Kashmir where he had a mystical experience, an epiphany, following which he stopped painting for a period of two years. During this time he read up extensively on Hindu and, particularly, local Shaivite philosophy. He emerged from this exile to start painting in a glorious abstract construction of the philosophical union of Shiva and Shakti, popularly recognised as *tantra*, the primordial merging of female and male principles and the creation of cosmic energy.

Santosh stayed this path for the rest of his career, first baffling, then dazzling, critics. It was also the start of the hippie movement and the flower children and coincided with their search for the mystic East, and the ritual abstraction begun by Santosh soon gained popularity and was claimed by other artists who began to find their own distinctive *tantra*-based constructs within the matrix of an emerging modern language. This included artists such as the extremely important J. Swaminathan, the Copenhagen-based Sohan Qadri, and at least partly in the works of the artists Jeram Patel, Jyoti Bhatt, K. V. Haridasan, and P. T. Reddy.

Most importantly, this language of neo-*tantra* was the focal point of artist Biren De's works. Biren De too was known for his cubist constructions before he broke away to paint in the abstract ritualisation of the *tantra* style. Unlike his predecessors, he moved away from any suggestion of the mystical, developing his work only in the form of colours that ranged from the warm to the cool, but communicated an intense burst of energy. This kinetic incandescence reflected his practice for the bulk of his artistic career.

– KISHORE SINGH



Jeram Patel attempted works in the mould of the miniatures (top) at the very beginning of his career but moved to abstraction, engaging with ideas of *tantra* (above), going on to pioneer an utterly new, material path for Indian abstraction



## UNDERSTANDING TANTRA

Post-independence, the Indian sub-continent went through a long but interesting phase of shuffle, of change and experiment. Socially, politically and culturally the country was going through a turbulent period but this disorder fuelled the creative minds of many. Literature, theatre and the visual art all experienced changes due to the wider turmoil all over the world and also due to the need for a new language or expression that could be significant enough to make India recognisable as an entity separate from the rest of the world, an India that held on to its traditional practices and yet could adapt itself to changing practices and more importantly, to modernity.

Indian art went through its own phases where artists experimented with different 'isms' prevalent then in the West – expressionism, impressionism, cubism, surrealism and others. Thus, art evolved as the artists began to travel and imbibe art practices around the world. Back home, they would try and assimilate their own ideas with the new influences along with what was native or local. In India, there has existed for centuries an art form that had its genesis in the principle of *tantra* and this art had diverse connotations in the minds of those who practiced it since *tantra* is both an experience and a rigorous practice. The word *tantra* is derived from the Sanskrit root *tan* meaning to expand and thus implying an expansion of knowledge.

*Tantra* helps the human body to identify the centres of energy of the *chakras*, thereby enabling the mind to grasp or realise things that are otherwise beyond its general cognitive capacity. This understanding is made possible through the process of yoga or meditative practice that helps awaken the cosmic power or *kundalini shakti* that lies dormant, and coiled, serpent-like, at the base of the human spine.

### MANTRA, YANTRA, TANTRA

A worshipper or 'yogi' continually tries to reach the ultimate reality, and in that quest he tries to give a form to the formless. In art, the artist or the 'shilpa yogi' is constantly trying to achieve the same, which he makes possible through *mantra* and *yantra*. *Mantra* is sound, considered the basic principle behind the creation and disbanding of all forms. *Yantra* is the geometrical composition or the tool of the tantric *sadhna*, meditation or the process of achieving the unified One. As neo-*tantra* artist, G. R. Santosh, defined it, '*yantra* is the pure formalisation of *mantra*'. *Mantra* is the formula or the equation and *yantra* is the diagram or the pattern, and *tantra* correlates the two. The *yantra* is composed of simple geometrical forms, built of the line, triangle, square, circle, point and hexagon. Within them are enclosed the *mantras* which when appropriately brought together, lead to the emergence of different aspects of a specific image.



A traditional yantra from the Shwetambara Jain sect that reveals the use of symbolic representation of esoteric principles to do with the cosmos and human life.



The first and the most important monosyllabic *mantra* is *Om*, the sound symbol of the supreme one. The sound *Om* is the combination of three syllables – ‘a’, ‘u’ and ‘m’ and it presupposes a (visual) pattern that consists of a line, a semi-circle and a point. Every divine form possesses a *beeja mantra* or the seed syllable. Additionally, the focus of a *yantra* is its centre or the *bindu*, the *beeja* or the cosmic nucleus that marks the unity of the male and the female principle.

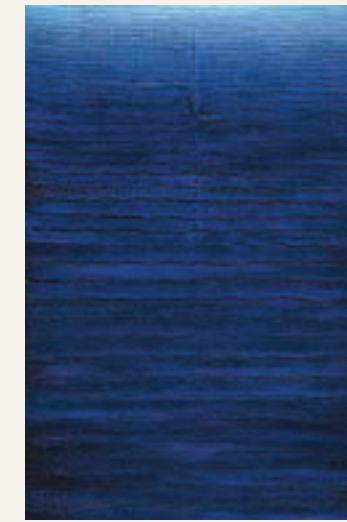
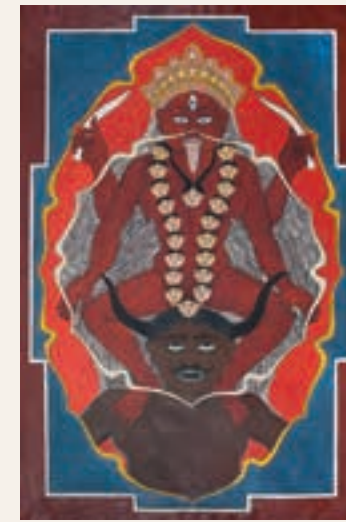
According to *tantra*, it is the unity of these two energies, the *purusha* and the *prakriti*, or the *hiva* and the *shakti*, which leads to the ultimate truth. According to the pre-eminent *tantra* scholar, Ajit Mookherjee, *shiva* represents pure consciousness, which is inactive, the static aspect of ultimate reality – while *shakti* represents the world force, the kinetic energy of the concrete universe. According to the *Skanda Purana*, *shiva* is the ‘ashabda brahman’ and *linga*, Shiva’s phallic association, is the name for space in which the whole universe is in the process of formation and dissolution. *Shiva* moves only when it unites with *shakti*, the ‘shabda brahman’.

As art became highly abstract and began to involve basic forms like vertical and horizontal lines, dots and circles and triangles and squares, *tantra* art followed suit and came to rely on the integration of geometric and architectural patterns. As mentioned above, the *yantra* is a composition resulting from such integration. The most common and the simplest manifestation of such composition is the hexagon formed by the upward pointing ‘male’ triangle and the downward pointing ‘female’ triangle, thus representing the union of the male and female energy. This star-hexagon’s numeric equivalent is the number 6. There are various such permutations and combinations and each such form stands for similar energies and principles. But according to *tantra* scholar, Madhu Khanna, the inner dynamics of any *yantra* is difficult to understand ‘without the sound vibration that empowers the sacred

symbol, i.e., the *mantra*’. All traditional *yantras* have some form of *mantras*, either ‘atomic’ monosyllabic sound syllables such as *brim*, *sbrim* or whole *mantras* of the deities associated with them. These *mantras* are regarded as a sonic body of the deities. In Khanna’s view, *mantras* are the sound forms of the world as a web of resonances and vibrations. The most perfectly configured *yantra* is the *Sri Yantra* that ‘embodies the graded order of manifestation’ and is seen as the ‘diagram of evolution and involution of cosmos’. It is controlled by the invisible *bindu* and is composed of interlacing triangles, signifying the male-female union. These *Sbri Yantras* are mostly set within squares and rectangles which represent earth and other categories of nature.

Whereas in the genre of abstract art, one can see the dimensions of space and time, *tantra* art goes further and brings in the concept of light and sound. Sound and light are related in a way where every colour has its own sound and every sound has its own colour form. Perhaps it is this relation of colour and sound that urged modern Indian *tantra* artists to portray the same on canvas. Extraordinary work has been attempted by artists such as J. Swaminathan, Sohan Qadri, Biren De, G. R. Santosh, K. C. S. Paniker, P. T. Reddy and K. V. Haridasan, to name a few prominent ones. In the works of these artists, one witnesses the desire to return to a state of primitivist orientation and to regain a past that has been perhaps lost.

There is also an urge to connect to inner reality and to bring the spiritual into their art and to achieve this they try and employ in their works elements which they feel closer to. Paniker uses symbols in his works but according to him they mean nothing. They help him design a picture which is complex, precise, elaborate and even decorative, devotional and mystic. His series *Words & Symbols* is, therefore, regarded as an echo of cryptic content where works often look like an astronomical chart or coded messages. Biren



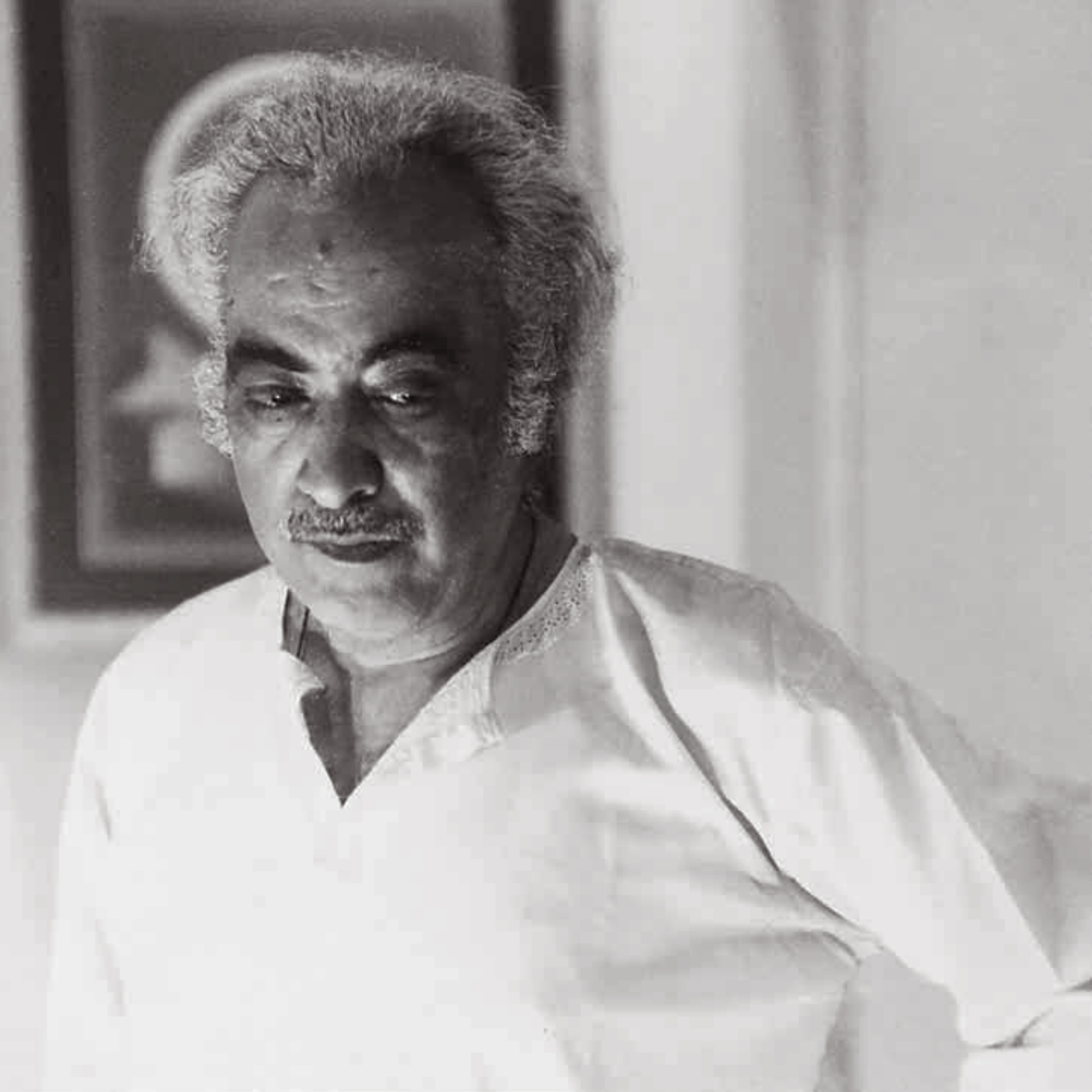
Responses to *tantra* by various Indian neo-*tantra* painters. (clockwise from top left): P. T. Reddy, Sohan Qadri, K. V. Haridasan, J. Swaminathan

De’s works are about light and energy, the former being the nucleus or the matrix in all his paintings. Energy radiates in his work in the form of light, and as it spreads and glows, it comes back to its core. In the landscapes of Swaminathan, one witnesses a serenity that can be traced back to *Upanishad*-ic thoughts. The yellows and reds, along with the occasional bird, tree and mountain are very Zen-like and can aid the viewer to get into a quiet and contemplative state of mind. Sohan Qadri’s colour-saturated, seamless fields indicate human presence sublimated as energy. Haridasan’s works are inspired by the synthesis of the male-female and the positive-negative energies and he incorporates myth, symbols and symmetry to create his *mandalas* wherein he uses motifs of fire, petal and lotus, the elliptical form, suggestive of the ‘brahmand’ or the universe and the ideas of *shakti*. The

works of G. R. Santosh are unique in the sense that he is probably one of the few artists whose work bears a reference to tantric ideology, specifically, Kashmir Shaivism. His balanced and illuminated canvases are impeccable for their portrayal of the male-female unity.

According to art critic, S. A. Krishnan, each of these artists is trying in his own way to experience the mystery and magnificence of the world from a metaphysical point of view, and to express visions, again, each in his own way. Ajit Mookerjee adds, ‘Art is not a profession but a path towards truth and self-realization to both the maker and spectator.’ It is, therefore, necessary for the *tantra* artist to become serious in his *sadhna* or practice to chalk out the path of realisation correctly even if it means experimentation.

– POONAM BAID



G. R. SANTOSH

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ARTICULATING A PHILOSOPHY



## PIONEERING NEO-TANTRA

The journey of neo-tantric artist and poet, Gulam Rasool Dar, better known as Gulam Rasool Santosh, began in the early 20th century. He was born into a conservative Shia Muslim family in Srinagar's Chinkral *mohalla* in 1929 to Gulam Mohammad Dar and Syeda. During school, as he was struggling to cope with studies and eventually going to pass his admissions, he found himself earning a living in the cottage industry in Kashmir – silk weaving, handicrafts and painting. Before his father, then a policeman, passed away at a young age, Santosh had been put to work by him, as a clerk who maintained the account books for businesses in the Srinagar valley.

### MEETING RAZA

Painter and photographer, Shabir Hussain Santosh, the artist's son, says that his father would routinely run away to Dal lake or the banks of the river Jhelum to draw and paint and turned out scores of landscapes. His talent was appreciated by his teachers in school, particularly his drawing masters. Initially displeased, his mother allowed him to paint upon finding that tourists were interested in buying young Gulam's paintings, letting him do so as long as they sold and brought in much needed income in the wake of his father's death. The banks of the Jhelum were popular with budding artists, painting the scenery, and this is where Santosh met S. H. Raza for the first time in 1950. Raza was

astonished by the painter's perspective of the houseboat in a painting, a common enough subject amongst local artists but Santosh's skill shone. A 1952 painting, *Houses on the Jhelum* (see page 14), is a great example of this.

Gulam Rasool slowly made his way to an expressive style reflecting almost a sense of joy through his use of near fauvist colours to communicate the landscapes, sky and homes against the river. Raza then asked him to join the Progressive Artists' Association in Srinagar, a group of young artists' who were influenced by progressive thought and wanted to be modernists, in the wake of the example set by the Progressive Artists' Group, Bombay, of which Raza himself was a founding member. Raza played a great role in Gulam Rasool's career, recommending his name for further studies and scholarship by the state government to Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda, where the young painter went on to train under the renowned artist, N. S. Bendre.

### EARLY YEARS AS A PAINTER

In 1954, at the university, he studied and excelled in drawing the figure and came to excel in years to come in portraiture, in particular. During his time in Baroda, he produced a large number of landscapes and figurative works, mainly in the cubist style much like his contemporaries – Jyoti Bhatt

and Shanti Dave. His figurative canvases drew strongly though on everyday life in Kashmir. After his return to Kashmir in 1956, Santosh returned to the pull of the Dal lake and the river Jhelum and his work captured the flow of the river against the landscape of houses and slums, landscapes and sunsets around the river. He also captured activities such as women in boats, conversing, or depicted in traditional, celebratory dances in a cubist style, popular then among several Indian modernists, particularly those trained in Baroda.

His work was no longer made to attract the attention of tourists and began to gain in artistic concerns and merit. Being inspired by the styles of Western artists like Paul Cezanne and Pablo Picasso, Gulam Rasool's work began to reflect a signature style – a cubistic breaking up of planes that appeared in both his figurative works and landscapes. He participated in a number of group exhibitions in India and Europe, displaying his impressionistic landscapes. During the Fifties and Sixties, the use of earthy colours in his work became a strong characteristic, also seen in his work in his later abstract phases. His painting, *Peace*, won an award at the national art exhibition organised by Lalit Kala Akademi in 1957 and the work was acquired by National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. After a period of such works, his figuration began to grow increasingly abstract, melding often with landscapes in a range of pictorial experimentation among which was a phase of working with thick impasto.

While Santosh's talent continued to grow, there was trouble in his personal life. Santosh had met the girl he knew he was going to marry but religious differences led to their families refusing approval for the marriage. Therefore, the two ran away to Mussoorie where the Hindu bride married her Muslim groom. Back in Kashmir, their marriage was not accepted which led them to move to the capital of the country, New Delhi, in 1960. This is when Gulam Rasool

Dar decided to take on his wife's name, Santosh, as his own and began henceforth to be known by that Hindu name.

### THE MODERNIST PAINTER OF PORTRAITURE AND ABSTRACTION

G. R. Santosh remained an avid practitioner of portraiture for a considerable period. He painted portraits of well-known personalities, like Karan Singh, son of the last ruling Maharaja of Kashmir, that were exhibited at Delhi's Gallery Chanakya. He also painted portraits of other politicians such as Zakir Husain, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter, Indira Gandhi. Besides these, he did studies of his own family, his mother, wife and children, and painted a portrait of the artist, J. Sultan Ali. In his portraits, he was able to capture something of the moment and the sitter's personality through various elements, whether the gaze, the textures of clothing or drapes, or the play of skin tones. His son, Shabir, recalls his father saying that whoever knew how to make portraits knew how to paint.

His abstractions form a significant number of his early works, where the confidence of his brush strokes in abstract landscapes and cityscapes was commendable. In them, there is an element of depth that Santosh created through the use of wax and oil paints applied in impasto. He would use the encaustic technique to create a three-dimensionality which brought out the intensity of certain forms on the canvas. In 1963, he won his second national award and also published his first novel *Samandar Pyaasa Hai* in Urdu. And a few years later, in 1979, he received a Sahitya Akademi Award for his collection of poems called *Besukh Rub* besides being awarded the Padma Shri in 1977 and the Kalhana Award in 1985.

Even after moving to Delhi, he continued to look to his native Kashmir for inspiration, something that stayed with him forever. He interpreted the Kashmir landscape





Instances of the expressive landscapes – *Houses on the Jhelum*, 1952 (left) – and the abstraction – *In the Snows of Kashmir*, 1963 (top) – G. R. Santosh painted early in his career that drew on his native Kashmir



Exhibition catalogue of Santosh's exhibition *Obeisance to Sharika* featuring works with symbols and geometric abstraction (far left) and drawings of tantric symbols and names in Santosh's hand (left)

in abstraction as seen in the 1963 painting, *In the Snows of Kashmir* (facing page, top). Working in thick impasto with oil and wax to create relief, Santosh employs a muted palette of whites, browns, greys and blacks, bringing to mind the gleam of snow-clad mountains. The canvas is treated as a space to paint a mental landscape – a formal structure arrived at in a logical way.

#### MOVE TO TANTRA

Santosh's art kept pace with the trajectory of other Indian modernists till a chance mystical experience in the hills outside Srinagar prompted him to a lifelong study and practice of *tantra* and a profound change in his painting style and concerns. In 1964, at the suggestion of a friend, Santosh visited Amarnath, a famous cave shrine a little beyond Pahalgam in Kashmir. The shrine's legend dictates that Lord Shiva had recounted to Parvati the *Amar Katha* of his immortality and the formation of the universe. He took her to Amarnath cave so that no living being would hear this immortal tale and it would remain only between

them. Legend has it that Shiva then took the form of an ice *lingam* or phallus and till date, hundreds of pilgrims travel annually to the Amarnath cave to catch a glance of the ice shaped in the form of a *lingam* and pray to Lord Shiva – an event that also marks Kashmir's centuries-long syncretic tradition.

The experience deeply impacted Santosh. Although he never discussed the nature of his experience in the cave, it was a mystic one of self-realisation that dramatically altered his life. Shantivir Kaul, Santosh's biographer, describes this newfound awareness as: 'It understands existence on the microcosmic as well as macrocosmic levels. It also considers the physical body to be a vehicle for the attainment of self-realisation. It recommends the use of *mantra* or chanting – consisting mostly of phonemes rather than words – and the contemplation of *yantra* or the visual – a schematic visual stimulus – for *sadhana* (meditative practice). This is supposed to uncoil and raise the inherent energy (*Kundalini shakti*, energy that is wound like a coiled serpent) from its





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