

Biren De "I don't care about art critics"

Says the self-opinionated master. But he is also first-rate.

By Chaitanya Kalbag

I'M a very well known painter. I don't care for those stultified art critics. It's you 'un knowledgeableables' who can reach out on our behalf." The ego behind that 'well known painter' remark is evident as is Biren De's scorn for things conventional, and his voluminous and rapid-fire speech. Scarf around his neck, puffing away at a pipe that gives out all too often, Biren is a quick-footed and restless man, dabbling nervously at a small canvas and then flinging himself into a chair at the other end of the room to squint at that dab.

In his fifty-third year, Biren does not carry the heavy-jowled portentiousness that other middle-aged and 'eminently successful' artists reek of on his trim shoulders. He brings to mind what his old friend and critic Richard Bartholomew said of him in 1958: "...despite the facade of Byronic masculine robustness and the *enfant terrible* attitude to art, I have found him, at heart, an orthodox Bengali, not quite urbanised or Bohemian...it is this compound of the sensuous and the ascetic that is responsible for the lushness of his colouring and the mathematical precision (and austerity) of his composition."

Biren readily agrees that many of the so-called 'art connoisseurs' who flock to our art galleries hardly know he exists, or if they do, do not recognise his stature. While he stubbornly clings to the unadulated world he has built around himself, he laughs heartily at people who label his recent work either 'abstract' or 'tantric'; it is evident, too, that he does not care for newcomers who hold lucrative shows, for he recognises that the art market has never been so good, and never have there been so many 'patrons' with bulging wallets who collect artists' signatures like a head-hunter would his victims' scalps. It would be only too easy for Biren, who has been painting since 1948, to throw his seniority and his unquestionable talent in people's faces. But he desists. His last show was at Delhi's Dhoomi Mal Gallery in October 1977, and contained representations

of all three phases he has travelled through—first portraiture, then figurative work, and now this 'abstract' period.

"People were surprised," he recalls. "Nobody knew I could have had such a 'conventional' beginning. They asked me why I did not hold exhibitions more often. I told them, I'm not one of those deliberate Bohemians, I hold a show only to get enough to eat and to paint. I don't paint in order to live."

He points to the small canvas he

has been working on. "I have been working on huge canvases for a long time," he says, "and I'm sick of them. But small ones are so difficult! Your mind and your fingers get used to a larger area."

Biren has been well known to many long-time art lovers here and abroad. He was a young and unsure man when he arrived in Delhi on January 17 1949 ("I remember the date so well!") for a month's holiday. He has stayed on, through three decades, going off occasionally when the urge to travel and live elsewhere overcame him. Hussain, Ram Kumar, Tyeb Mehta and Gujral were all his contemporaries. Even in those early years, he recalls, he wanted to be different from the others. His education at the College of Art in Calcutta had instilled in him an unerring instinct for disciplined draughtsmanship; but his



perceptions were moulded by the traditional Bengali background he came from. Today, of course, Biren says he has cut himself off totally from his roots. But his Bengali romanticism, and his fiery emotions, have hardly been diluted.

About 30 years ago, Biren began his career by painting portraits. Indian contemporary painting was in its infancy, and his friends were only too easily influenced by Western realism, impressionism, and post-impressionism. "I did not swear by Paris and Picasso," remembers Biren, "and this puzzled my friends. There was Hussain, as showmanlike as he is now, who would stride up to me with canvases rolled under his arm and exclaim, 'Biren, we must go here! We must go there! We must paint this and that! We must illustrate society!' And I would tell him that I wanted to do my own thing and did not care about what the others did."

But portraiture was a conventional way of beginning one's career. Commissions flew Biren's way. He made a name for himself in the right circles, and found himself "in the thick of people who knew how to sit for portraits!" Many distinguished Indians and Britishers sat for Biren—among his subjects were C. Rajagopalachari, the first Indian Governor-General, and later Dr S. Radhakrishnan. But he soon tired of it, and around 1951 began to paint figurative compositions, "sparse in detail and vivid in colour."

Manjori Nudes

At that time, Biren's paintings were filled with symbols of his 'personal search', and as Bartholomew pointed out then, "Water, fish, stylized plants, and a few animals such as goats and dogs function as Biren's symbols of the vital life and of the freedom of the instincts...these private symbols represent forms of liberation." At that time, Biren spent a lot of time among the Santals, and his canvases were covered with tribal earthiness, their elemental physique and their 'fundamental' colours; his compositions showed men and women, the former virile and the latter voluptuous. In 1954, he painted his famous Manjori nudes, showing a young Santal girl, first on her back with one leg raised slightly, then on her stomach with her left leg lying over her right one, somewhat reminiscent of Gauguin's Polynesians.

"Those nudes, titled 'Manjori, my

tribal friend', are still my favourites," says Biren, "and I haven't and never will part with them." What made his portrayal of Manjori so suffused with passion and attention to line and contour? "I have been a lover all my life," he explains, "and when I painted Manjori I was young, and passionate. Sex was very much on my mind. I was in love with Manjori—she was like a tigress! Raw, elemental, and yet possessed of a spiritual calm that I could recognise because, long before the Beatles came to the Maharishi, I used to visit Hardwar and Lachmanjhula often and drink in spirituality. Manjori hardly used to talk, but she became my pet. She held so much within her! That's why I have never sold those nudes. Later I got Manjori married off to a rickshaw-puller. But she'll ever remain fresh in my memory."

Tantric Mood

Biren took to teaching at an art school in Delhi, and carried on till 1964, when he tired of it. This period also marked his transition to spiritual themes, progressing from a semi-cubistic style to a very personal geometric one. It was then that people began to call him a 'tantric' painter. "All my paintings portray essentially the same thing," Biren says. "I wish to show the fusion of Purusha with Prakriti, the same energy that characterized my portraits and then my Santal paintings and then the figurative work and now this. If people called it



tantra, they were welcome to. I was never consciously tantric in my representations."

So it was that Biren moved into his third phase, what most people would refer to as 'abstracts'. For a long time now he has not painted portraits or figures, and does not intend to. "I no longer want to paint for the industrialists and the poli-

ticians, the First and Second Secretaries of foreign embassies who have money and dangle it before me. They think artists live in an ivory tower. That's why I live here, that's why I don't bother to publicise myself. I am not married, I don't own a fridge or a car or an insurance policy. I only have a cook who has stuck to me through thick and thin. He knows I am curiously mad and yet there is an unspoken affection binding us. Of course there is more money in 'commercialised' painting, something many of my contemporaries specialise in. There is an allure in the ambassadors and their wives, in State portraiture, in the Establishment. But I decided I must shrink my needs in order to concentrate on my work. Why must I follow the West? I don't have a sundowner or a nightcap! I eat rice and dal and chappatis and sleep on a charpoy."

These later paintings of Biren's contain circles, squares, and ellipses, usually with blinding streaks of light radiating from a centre of combustion. Some critics have likened his ellipses, which he says he has always been fascinated by, with the phallus, and his circles with the tantric vaginal symbol, the Yoni. But Biren disclaims such meanings. "Man and his discipline and his quest are what matters," he says. All these paintings are in vibrant colours, pulsating with vitality. If one sits facing them, a gradual feeling of being hypnotised by the energy that emanates from the canvas, symbolising the 'man-universe relationship' that Biren is always trying to portray, overtakes one.

"I just sit and look at the bare wall and it comes to me," says Biren. "then I keep adding a touch here and a touch there. I'm certainly nothing special—my story is of intrinsic and extrinsic struggle. All I want to do and be and become: these are all my prayers. I never intended to make a career out of painting—I could have been a cobbler and talked the same way."

Critics say Biren has an inflated ego. He retorts, "I did possess a big ego at one time! But now I have worked it out of my system. I don't entitle my works any longer—how can I when it all comes from my belly? I don't even sign my paintings any more—'Biren De' scrawled at the bottom of the canvas makes no difference to me. People have asked me if this means running away from society, whether my paintings have 'social relevance'. I have never run away. My main objective is to



'Manjori, My Tribal Friend,' 1954.



depersonalise myself. I want to burn and burn and burn on the canvas—that is my aim in life."

To people who worry that they may not understand or be able to appreciate art, Biren says, "You don't have to appreciate art by reading Ruskin. Basically there are three kinds of creative people—the documenters of their times like the German expressionists, the ones who try to escape through several realms of fantasy, and finally the ones who journey beyond into a personal self-expression that may not be intelligible to everyone. The time will come when I will enter the fourth stage, where I needn't paint or talk, where I will realise the Upanishadic truth: I will just have to sit under a tree, and be one with IT. What is 'it'? Light? Energy? God? A state of compassionate consciousness? I don't know how one should describe it. To me, this seems to be the challenge. Isn't it the same for everyone?"

Photographs by N. K. Sareen

