

Not living in exile

MAQBOOL Fida Husain, or simply 'MF' to art connoisseurs across the world, has been in the eye of a storm, thanks to some of his recent sketches. The 'International Gypsy', as he fondly describes himself, has been living in Dubai for nearly a year now. Back home in India, a section of Hindu extremists is adamant that this 'Muslim painter' must answer for the "insulting" depiction of their deities. At 90-plus, one of the most visible symbols of secular India is facing a court case as well as a concerted hate mail campaign geared to socially isolate him. In a freewheeling interview, the celebrated painter talked about some of the controversies, apart from art, answering some questions, skirting others. But he was crystal clear about one thing: No censorship can bog down an artist, for he or she is always ahead of the times.

By Mehre Alam

How has life in Dubai been like?

I HAVE been coming to Dubai for the past 30 years. My brothers were working here. I came to Dubai for the first time in 1978. At that time, there was hardly anything that we now see here. I have seen the whole city grow in front of my eyes.

Around three years ago, I decided that I must have my own base here in Dubai, my own museum and my own villa. The reason is obvious. Dubai is going to become a major art centre of the world. They have all the means to achieve that. And they have the vision.

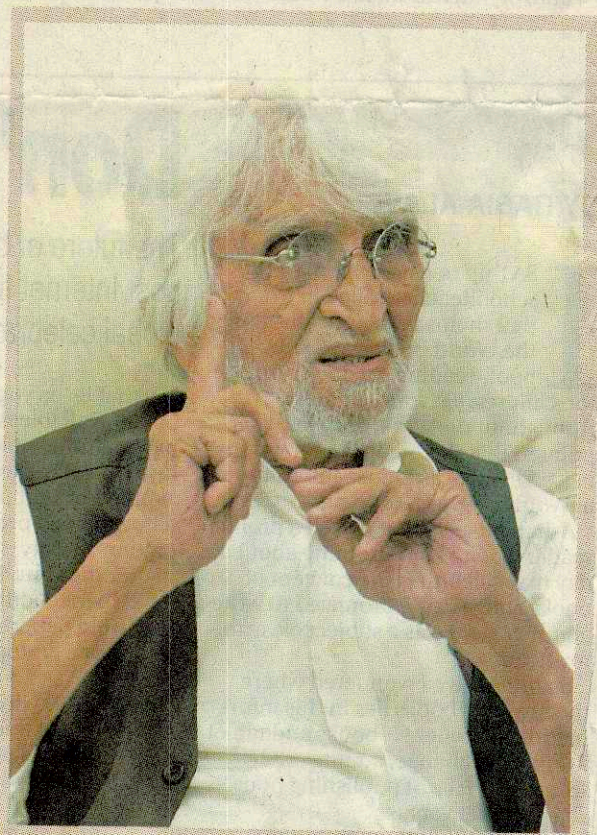
The economic growth of this country has been phenomenal. However, as far as the cultural aspect is concerned, there has not been much to look forward to in the past.

But I must also say they are changing this perception. They will host a very big art event this year in Dubai, bigger than any other art event organised in any part of the world.

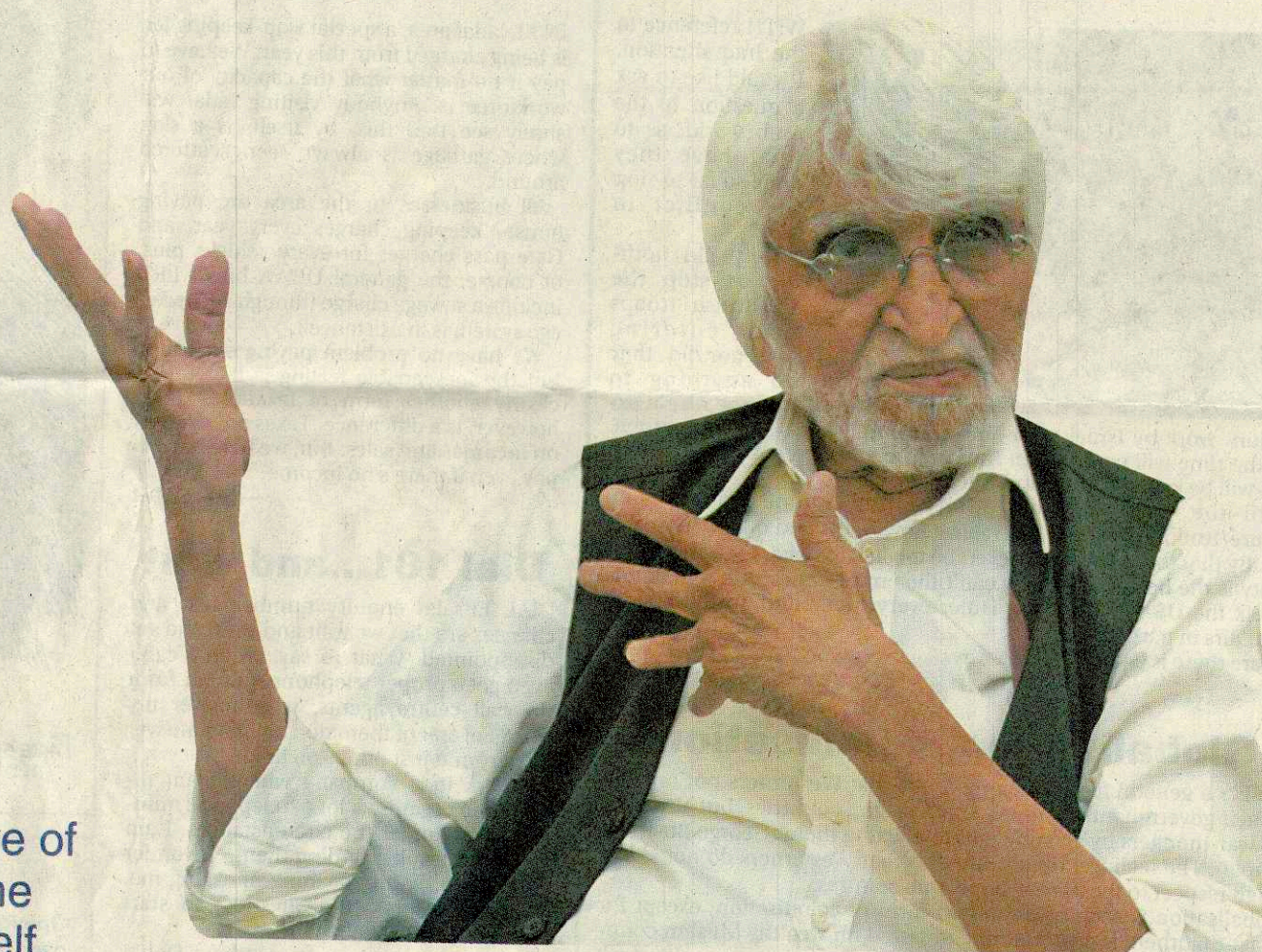
I saw the future here. And this future not only concerns the art world, but also so many things else. Dubai is likely to surpass every other city in the world in its uniqueness and grandeur.

You have often described yourself as an "International Gypsy". But you have also confessed to being homesick. Which one is the real Husain?

I am going to India next week. There is no such problem (refers to the concerted campaign against him). In fact, I have been working abroad for the past 50 years or so. In the 80s, I worked in New York.



Prior to that, I was working in London and Paris. I love to work in various places. I have no permanent studio anywhere in the world. I even work in my hotel room or any other place where I feel comfortable. I love to work in various environments.



Photos by Mohammed Mustafa Khan

How badly do you miss India?

India is my motherland. Dubai is not. But please do not arrive at other conclusions. It's not that some of the fundamentalist forces have been keeping me away from India. Nothing like that. It's my choice. I wanted to work here. They say I am in an exile. But the government has not enforced anything.

It's an altogether different matter that a legal case is going on against me in India. But earlier also, a case filed against me went on for eight years. You cannot avoid the law.

There is a widespread feeling that you have become a target of religious football.

I don't think so. This talk is all bunkum. It's the creation of the media. They have never stopped me. Nor have they ever been able to stop any creative movement even in the past.

Take the Progressive Movement in India. We launched this contemporary art movement in the late 40s. It began in Mumbai and then went to Kolkata, Delhi, etc. In fact, there were some restrictions under the British rule. We fought the British influence in art. There was also this revivalist school in India that wanted to take it all back. They too had no vision.

But we fought both these two forces in what was like a political campaign. The Progressive Movement started in 1947. By 1960-61, these two schools of thought had been virtually demolished.

At one time, there were restrictions in the art colleges in Delhi, Kolkata and other cities. Students were advised against meeting us "the Progressives". Because we were supposed to be the people who were corrupting Indian culture. But today, where are those revivalists? They were all thrown out.

How important is creative freedom for an artist? Should artists be more sensitive towards religious sentiments of various groups or sections of people? Should there be some limits to freedom. Your freedom ends where my nose begins?

I must repeat that I have never felt the pinch. Never! I am working here in Dubai because it's my choice. They did not ask me to go away from India. There is no warrant or anything like that against me back home. This has all been created by the media who hunt for such controversies. If you live somewhere else, they'll read meaning into it. They'll say Husain has been thrown out of the country.

Yes, I agree that public opinion is different. What I mean to say is that people may start believing such things. So let them believe.

If you see the history of mankind, artists have always been ahead of their times. In Europe, for example, after Renaissance, when Impressionists came, they were accused of being bogus. They faced allegations. They were thrown out. Now, Impressionists are part of the classics.

As a Member of Parliament of India, you painted a lot of historical figures. Now that you are staying in this part of the world, do we expect to see sketches of figures in this region?

I am an Indian painter. No matter where I stay, in whichever part of the world, I will always paint India. My latest exhibition too is titled the "Imprint of India". This is the result of my one year of meditation. I restricted myself to my work to finish it.

I lived in New York and London, but I never painted the US or the UK. There were a few sketches here and there, but it was mainly India that I had been painting.

My culture is Indian. This is a 5,000-year-old culture. Why should I choose to go the other way? The Indian culture is truly unique. It's made up of so many influences that came to India. The influences remained there. Together, they evolved into a composite culture.

In Italy, if you observe it closely, there is not a single non-Christian symbol. They claim to be very modern, but they are actually very retrogressive in this regard.

What is your take on the clash of civilisations?

I think it's all political and economic. That's why we artists have nothing to do with that. The art or culture world has nothing to do with this so-called clash of civilisations. There never was a clash of cultures at any point of time in the history of mankind.

In fact, as far as culture is concerned, there never was a clash of civilisations. It has always been give-and-take. The culture of the world has evolved. Take Egyptians or the Chinese. They have become universal cultures, but by still keeping their identities intact.

So it's more superficial than real.

Culture means the way of living. For example, the Indian or Chinese way of eating or dressing. If you talk of culture, there has always been an interaction, the give-and-take.

Do you think there is a need for more dialogue between the West and the Muslim world to avert any real or imagined clash of civilizations?

Let me reiterate that as far as the art world is concerned, there is no misunderstanding. The problem lies in the minds of those who are clashing for political or economic reasons. The artists are not concerned with all that. We are there to create harmony through music, literature, painting. That has been the role, always.

Of late, there has been a concerted hate mail campaign against you. At the same time, there has been a sea of support too. Do you feel bothered?

I am only concerned with art and culture. I have no opinion on anything else.