

Enraged art fraternity cries shame

In exile for three years, MF Husain has been offered Qatari citizenship



WANT HIM BACK: Ram Rahman; Raghu Vyas.

IT'S AN extreme case scenario. M. F. Husain, the exiled master of modern Indian art who turns 96 this September, may not die an Indian. The Capital's art fraternity reacted in rage as news trickled in on Thursday morning that Husain had been conferred the nationality of Qatar by the emirate's rulers, even though he did not ask for it.

If he were to indeed take up the new nationality, he would cease to be an Indian. For, India does not allow dual citizenship. And in the case of a man with only as many years to live as is possible for a 95-year-old, the scenario appears scary for the country's pride if the best known Indian artist were to die a foreigner.

Apparently sensing the barrage of calls he would have received after this news gained currency, Husain, who is currently in Dubai, kept his mobile phone switched off.

His Dubai-based son Mustafa, too, was unreachable. Shamsad, his son and an artist who lives in New Delhi, refused to talk on the "Qatar issue at all".

Artist-activist Ram Rahman, who has been at the forefront of a campaign for the return of Husain to India and his safety in the country, said: "We don't want to talk about his death but how many years does he have to live anyway? The impending change of nationality is a shame but a bigger shame would be his death as a national of another country."

The SAHMAT member hints at what could be an ironic situation. "He (Husain) has mentioned several times that he would like to die in his country. If he takes up this (Qatari) nationality, his wish may just be fulfilled."

It's been three years since Husain left India in February 2007 after continued persecution at the hands of right-wing fundamentalists who took him to court for the alleged depiction of Hindu goddesses in the nude.

The final straw was the vandalism of his Mumbai house after which the artist left the country for good. He has been dividing his time between Lon-

HOT IN MARKET



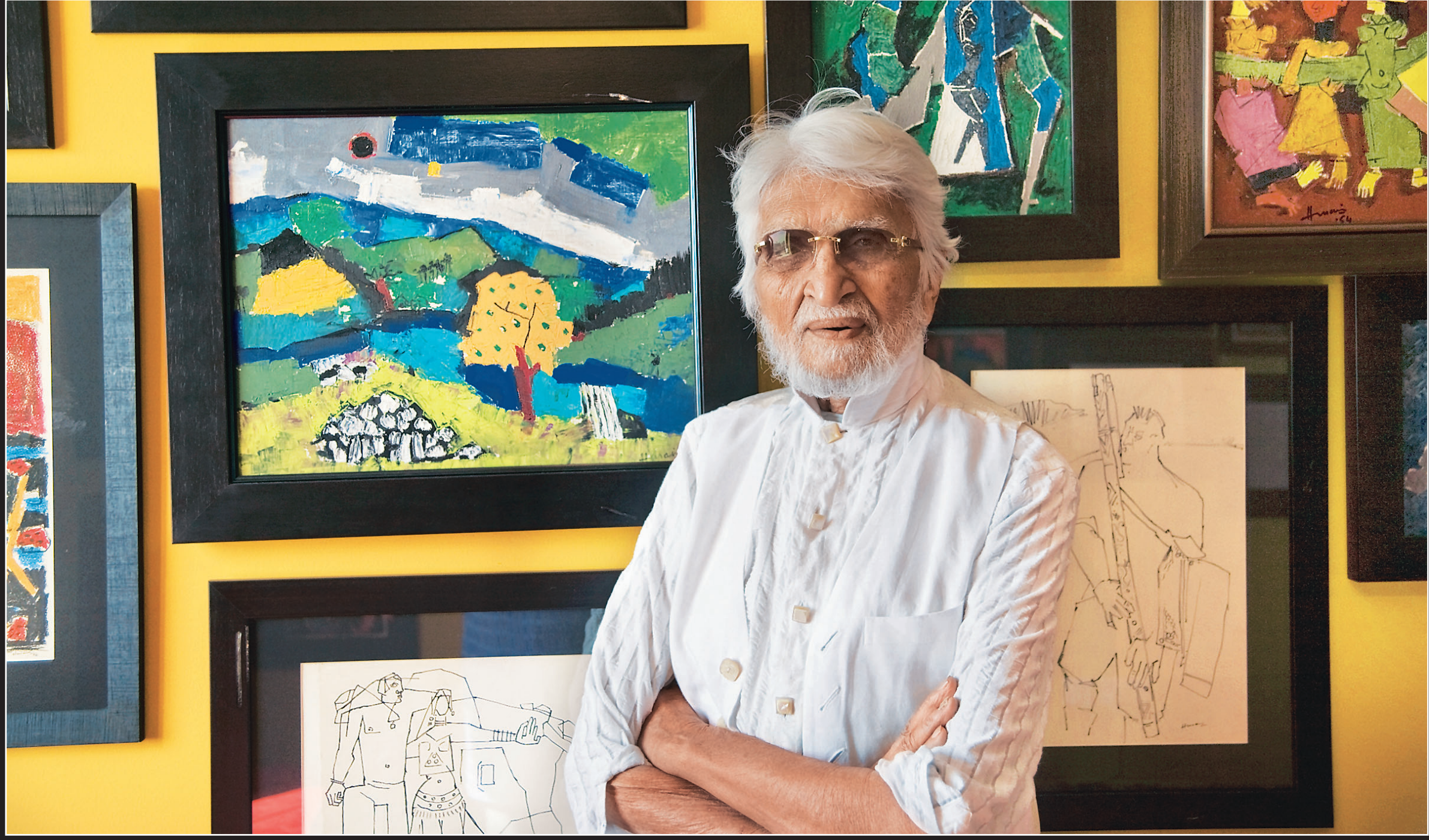
Rs 7.45 crore
Battle of Ganga and Jamuna, Mahabharat 12, broke records at Christie's 2008 auction



Rs 4.4 crore
Tribute to Hashmi came out tops at the Emami Chisel Art's 2008 auction in Kolkata



This untitled oil on canvas by Husain is expected to fetch Rs 90 lakh to Rs 1.2 crore at Safronart's auction on March 10-11, a high price in a recessionary market



THE MASTER IN EXILE: Maqbool Fida Husain poses for a photo for artist-activist Ram Rahman in his 'Red Room' when the latter had visited the painter in Dubai in December 2007.

By Archana in New Delhi

don and Dubai ever since.

Ashish Anand of the Delhi Art Gallery, who opposed the decision of the India Art Summit 2008, to keep Husain's canvases away from the Delhi fair fearing security risks, echoed Rahman.

"I hate to talk about his death but if he has another 10 years to live, we have successfully reduced it further by forcing him into exile. He is homesick and wants to return but can't risk it as the government has done nothing to ensure that he is not attacked physically by the fundamentalists," Anand said.

The city's art fraternity wonders what more the government needs to wake up and take action. At the same time, Husain's artist friends do not believe that he is likely to take up the honorary Qatari nation-

ality. However, they argue that the issue is not about the change of nationality but about Husain's security, or the lack of it, in India.

Arun Vadehra of the Vadehra Art Gallery, who meets Husain every three to four months, said, "This development doesn't mean any-

Pals believe Husain won't take up Qatari nationality

thing for Indian art as it's about security. Every society has individuals who do not like a certain public figure. Sachin Tendulkar, for instance, is loved by all but he still moves around with a posse of security personnel. So does Amitabh Bachchan. M.F. Husain is in the same league. So why can't the gov-

ernment provide him security too?"

Artist Ram Kumar, Husain's friend of several decades with whom he spent time in Benaras painting the ghats, dismisses the possibility of his friend taking up the Qatari nationality.

So does Renu Modi of Gallery Espace, who entered the world of art at the behest of Husain. "The rulers of Qatar have honoured him in other ways too. An important project he is working on is about the history of the Arab civilisation commissioned by the Sheikh of Qatar," he said.

The Centre's apathy has irked the fraternity, which has time and again pleaded with various politicians for Husain's return and safety.

In fact, after the day's development, SAHMAT re-issued a letter it had sent to the President to honour

Husain with the Bharat Ratna. "We have written to the government so many times but it hasn't responded even once," Rahman said.

Right-wing artist Raghu Vyas, who was one of the first to go public against Husain's alleged depiction of the Hindu goddesses in the nude, believes that nobody has stopped Husain from returning to India.

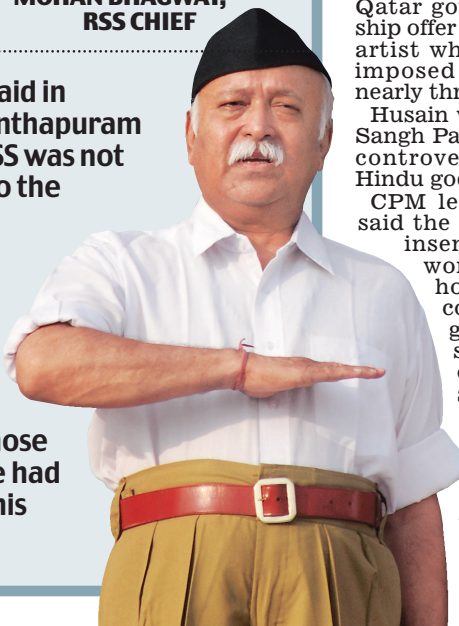
"My opposition was to the title of the painting (Sita Rescued) and not his art. He went into self-exile and is free to travel wherever he wants to. In fact, communists like Ram Rahman and others at SAHMAT have made things more difficult for Husain by making his shifting from India such an issue. I really want him to return and enjoy the things that he so pines for — kebabs, chai and more," Vyas said.

So does everybody else.

“We welcome M.F. Husain as an Indian citizen. Why should I oppose (his return)? But every Indian has to take care that he should not hurt the feelings of other Indians”

MOHAN BHAGWAT, RSS CHIEF

Bhagwat said in Thiruvananthapuram that the RSS was not opposed to the painter's return to India, but he should first apologise to the people whose feelings he had hurt with his paintings



Support for artist builds up as Centre promises security

By A. M. Jigeesh in New Delhi

SECTIONS of the artist fraternity and political parties other than the BJP put pressure on Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Thursday to assure M. F. Husain that he would be safe in India.

This came in the wake of the Qatar government's citizenship offer to the nonagenarian artist who has been in self-imposed exile abroad for nearly three years now.

Husain was hounded by the Sangh Parivar in India for his controversial paintings of Hindu goddesses.

CPM leader Brinda Karat said the Centre was "totally insensitive" to Husain's worries. "He was hounded out of the country. What was the government doing? It seems the Qatar government is more sensitive to a 95-year-old artist's concerns."

She added: "The Centre should have shown some more courage in taming the Sangh Parivar hooligans who were baying for Husain's blood. (It

should have also tried to settle the cases against the artist."

Prominent Muslim MP and UPA government supporter Asaduddin Owaisi said the PMO should initiate efforts to bring Husain back.

"This is a clear case of brain drain, but here Husain was forced to leave the country. It's really unfortunate that a 95-year-old man is still being crucified by the RSS. The Prime Minister's Office should assure him of safety," Owaisi said.

The SP questioned the Centre's silence on the issue. "Why are they (ministers) not doing

But BJP insists Husain abused artistic liberty

anything to prevent the communal forces from playing with the life of the country's greatest artist," party spokesperson Mohan Singh said.

Remembering Husain's association with SP's ideologue Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, Singh said the artist had drawn pictures of Ram for "Ram katha" on Lohia's insistence. "How can the RSS say Husain is anti-Ram? He is a true secularist who respects India's cultural traditions," he added.

The leader of Panther's Party, Prof. Bhim Singh, has

filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court seeking its intervention for Husain's dignified return to the country.

The Congress, on its part, said that if Husain chose to return to India, it was the government's responsibility to provide him full security.

"Husain is a citizen of India. If he wants to return, it's our responsibility as government to provide him security," spokesman Manish Tewari said.

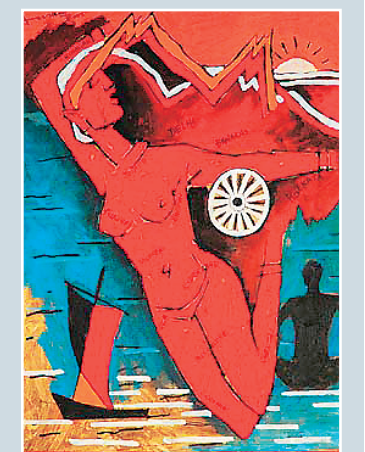
Union home secretary G.K. Pillai said there were no cases pending against the artist. "The Supreme Court has quashed them all. The government is ready to provide security to him if he returns to India."

Foreign secretary Nirupama Rao told reporters in Parliament that Husain "is the pride of India".

The BJP however, continued to argue that Husain exploited the liberty given to an artist.

"Everyone has (the) right to choose the place he wants to stay (in). But one must not exploit the liberty bestowed upon him as an artist. He (Husain) can accept the citizenship of any country he likes. The BJP has no dispute with that. But it does not support the right to hurt in the name of freedom of expression," the party's Rajya Sabha deputy leader M.S. Ahluwalia said.

IN THE EYE OF STORM



BHARAT MATA
The painting at the centre of controversy that M.F. Husain has found himself in. It shows the figure of Mother India as a nude woman nestling the map of India on her body

WHAT'S IN A NAME?
The painting owes its name not to Husain but to Chennai gallerist Sharan Apparao. She named it thus when the painting had become part of an online auction organised by Apparao and Nafisa Ali in 2006



SITA RESCUED
This is the painting that incited right-wing artist Raghu Vyas to launch a campaign against Husain in 1999 when it appeared in an exhibition

RIGHT-WING DEFENCE
Vyas led the campaign against Sita Rescued more than a decade ago. But now he says his campaign was not against Husain's art but against the title of the painting



GODDESS DURGA-THREE
This 1981 watercolour on paper bears the title in the artist's hand. It was part of Christie's New York auction in March 2008

PLAYING SAFE
Christie's held a preview of the auction in Delhi but did not exhibit any of Husain's canvases. The content left no doubt that the auction house didn't want any risk

Did Husain overstep limits of decency? The debate is on

By Archana in New Delhi

EVER since M.F. Husain went into exile three years ago, the art fraternity has strongly rallied behind him every time the issues plaguing him flared up.

The reason is that the fraternity is not divided on the issues of aesthetics and freedom of expression, the matter at the core of the Husain saga.

However, even as one revisits the trickiest story facing Indian art today, two uncomfortable questions crop up — did Husain overstep limits of decency by caricaturing Hindu gods and goddesses? Second, by opting for a self-exile, is he running away from a situation he should have taken head on?

The house is divided on these two posers. Those defending Husain's rights as an artist have quoted the rich and liberal tradition of Indian culture through the ancient times where depiction of nudity and even of sexual acts has found place as decorative sculptures on the walls of temples, Khajuraho and Konark being two instances.

In fact, a bench headed by the Supreme Court chief justice K.G. Balakrishnan, had, in September 2008, refused to initiate criminal proceedings against Husain for allegedly hurting public sentiments through some of his paintings.

Those against the notion say that despite artistic freedom, Husain or anybody else has no right to play with the religious sentiments of a community.

While the debate raged on, the centre of controversy left the country when the attacks on his art turned ugly.

Right-wing fundamentalists under various names have continued to attack Husain's art wherever it has come up for display in India, even in the artist's physical absence. Delhi would recall the instance when Husain's photographs, clicked by artist-activist Parthiv Shah, were vandalised at a show held at the SAHMAT office on the master's birthday on September 17, 2008.

The fear psychosis is such that many an art event has tried to play it safe by keeping Husain out of action. An instance is that of the Delhi preview of Christie's New York auction of South Asian Modern and Contemporary Art, held in March 2008. While

the auction house showcased a selection of art works by celebrated artists in Delhi, it discreetly ignored Husain's water colour on paper titled Goddess Durga-Three, showing the goddess astride a tiger's tail in an apparently offensive manner.

Some even rue the fact that Husain didn't stand up to the fundamentalists like Shah Rukh Khan did recently by taking on the Shiv Sena opposition to his film My Name Is Khan. However, Husain's defenders feel the two cases can't be compared as SRK didn't have legal hassles to handle. Ram Rahman says: "It's different with Husain as he can actually be arrested during the course of the investigation of cases against him."

The debate continues, while Husain paints and succeeds, albeit in exile.