

M.F. HUSAIN

FLYING HIGH AT 90

EVEN AS HE CELEBRATES HIS 90TH BIRTHDAY, M.F. HUSAIN, THE TALLEST ICON OF OUR TIMES, SHOWS NO SIGNS OF SLOWING DOWN. UNRAVELLING THE IRRESISTIBLE PERSONA OF THE BAREFOOT GENIUS WHO HAS NO PERMANENT ADDRESS.

■ By S. Kalidas

Even before you have met him or seen his resplendent (and highly priced) works—be they on canvas, paper, metal or celluloid—you have heard legends about his life, loves, antics, skirmishes and triumphs. Reams of print have chronicled his stylish barefoot stance, his unabashed love for (and celebration of) the feminine form, his disappearing acts, his unforeseen arrivals, his quicksilver wit, his painting of horses and his paintings on horses. To confound or to confuse, or merely to suit the need of the moment, he enjoys playing many roles—the artist, the buffoon, the patriarch, the fakir. When you do encounter the silver-haired superstar of Indian art, what strikes you most is his indomitable spirit and indefatigable energy. As he steps into his 91st year, Maqbool Fida Husain, easily the tallest icon of our times, packs the panache of a Picasso and the drama of a Dali in his trim, lithe frame.

On an overcast morning in Mumbai, I venture out to seek the man behind the enigma. The day's *DNA* has announced that the master is not entertaining the press or the public on his birthday, just two days away. "Just a family dinner at a venue to be decided on the spur of the moment," said the re-

port quoting his elder daughter Raeesa. However, bigger celebrations are in store. Beginning with Singapore on October 4, the grapevine informs, a host of exhibitions is being planned across the country slated for later in the year. Theatre director Nadira Babbar is said to be working on a play to be culled from his absolutely riveting autobiography *M.F. Husain Ki Kahani, Apni Zubaani* (The M.F. Husain story, in his own words). While at least one big Bollywood producer is believed to be interested in making a feature film based on it, Husain has his own plans too.

Husain is notorious for not keeping appointments. This son of a factory timekeeper has never been fettered by the hands of a clock. So I am apprehensive as I approach the Kohinoor Empress, a tall pencil-shaped apartment building just off Worli Naka where we are to meet. The lift deposits me on the second floor, facing a large canvas in the familiar signature style on one wall of the narrow corridor. On the other, is a shoe rack with three or four pairs of sundry footwear. This is just one of many homes spread around the globe that the gypsy-at-heart painter might use as night shelter, if he happens to be in the mood or in the vicinity. Otherwise, it serves as home to his younger daughter Aqeela.



**SUPERSTAR OF INDIAN
ART: Indomitable Husain**

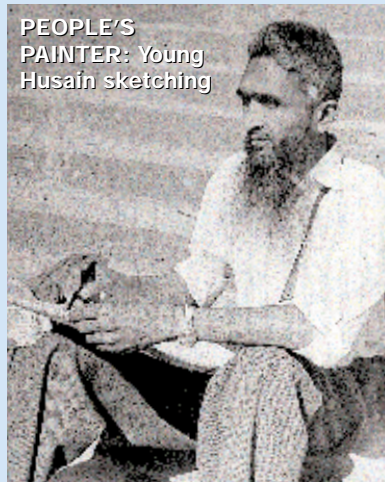
DATELINE HUSAIN

HUMBLE BEGINNING: Is born on September 17, 1915, at Pandharpur, Maharashtra. Studies art with N.S. Bendre at Indore. Marries Fazila in 1941. Initially earns money by painting cinema hoardings.

SHOW TIME: F.N. Souza inducts him into the Progressive Artists Group in 1947. His painting *Sunehra Sansaar* is shown at the Bombay Art Society exhibition. Holds his first one-man show in 1950. It is a sell-out.

THE PINNACLE: Is awarded the Padma

PEOPLE'S
PAINTER: Young
Husain sketching



Shri in 1966. Makes his first film *Through the Eyes of a Painter* in 1967. It wins the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival.

CULT FIGURE: Becomes a major but often controversial public figure. Is nominated to the Rajya Sabha in 1987. Does not utter a word in Parliament but publishes sketches under the title *Sansad Upanishad*. Receives the Padma Vibhushan.

MONEY AND MUSE: The 1990s were dedicated to Madhuri Dixit and the making of *Gajagamini*. Follows it with *Meenaxi: A Tale of Three Cities*. Signs a Rs 100 crore deal with industrialist G.S. Srivastava to sell 125 works, including *Our Planet Called Earth* series, in 2004.

BHASKAR PAUL



M.F. Husain does not have any permanent address.

In his bedroom-cum-studio, Husain *sahab* is at his sprightly best. He is surrounded by his latest set of serigraphs inspired by Nagesh Kukunoor's *Iqbal*. Completely smitten by the film, he has not only dragged all relatives and friends to see it but also wants to cast the lead actor Shreyas Talpade as the young Husain in an autobiographical film to be made this year.

Ever the performer, as INDIA TODAY photographer Bhaskar Paul asks him to pose for photographs, he opens his wardrobe and exults, "Let me put on

BIRTHDAY BOY: Husain cuts the cake with his family in Mumbai

something special for you. Look what they gave me for my birthday." He brings out an exquisite Mughal *chogha* (gown), very finely embroidered with motifs from his own paintings and a verse from Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib. The robe took six months to finish and is a present from his admirers in Pakistan. His glee at receiving the gift is infectious and I read out the lines inscribed on it: "*Hai kahan tamanna ka doosara qadam yaarab. Hamne to dasht-e-imkan ko naqsh-e-pa paya* (Where does ambition cast its next step,

oh God? I found a forest of desires in but a footprint)." When people compliment him on his zest for life, he says, "I started out late in the voyage of desires, so I have conserved my energy."

A fast and prodigious painter, Husain has reputedly painted over 25,000 paintings in 70-odd years. "Yet, I feel that is not even 10 per cent of what I have bubbling inside me," he asserts. He paints compulsively and furiously, anywhere and everywhere. Art galleries, cinema houses, public platforms and friends' homes—Husain has painted in all of them and painted them all as well. One well-known Delhi jour-

PRECIOUS MOMENTS

The maestro decided to make his birthday celebrations a private family affair

It was a classic role reversal. Instead of being indulged with expensive gifts on his 90th birthday, Maqbool Fida Husain decided to give his family a gift they will always cherish—his undivided attention. "Since he is a public figure, we have to go out and be with the public to spend time with him. But this year, he decided to be a father figure and the entire family spent 48 hours together," says Husain's daughter Raeesa. The artist's birthday eve was, thus, celebrated in a surprisingly quiet manner at Mumbai's exclusive restaurant The Zodiac Grill, at the Taj Mahal Palace & Tower. The entire family (22 of them; five great grandchildren included) flew in from all over the country. "The mood was very happy and jovial and we were all so loud, as if we were at some Udiipi. We probably chose the wrong restaurant," jokes Raeesa. But no effort was spared to make the evening a special one. Peeping into the kitchen, one saw the chefs at work, readying plates of Husain's favourite Camembert Soufflé and his order of the evening, lamb chops (he likes them medium done). Says Taj's Executive Grand Chef Hemant Oberoi: "Husain is fond of good food and is particular about the flavours." Individual attention ensured that the special evening had no skirmishes—mushrooms, something the family is not fond of, were kept out and no liquor was added to any of the dishes. The hotel prepared a special chocolate relish cake that was served on a dish shaped like a palette with a spoon in the shape of a brush. At the stroke of twelve, as pianist Austin Alphonso played "Happy Birthday", Husain sportingly blew the solitary magic candle. The actual birthday, which coincided with the auspicious Ganpati Visarjan, was spent at home in Worli with the family coming together for some professional portraits and a lavish home-cooked meal. "We cooked his favourite yakhni pulao, kebabs and rotis," says Husain's younger daughter Aqeela. This is one memory that will definitely find its way into the Husain family album.

by Geetika Sasan Bhandari

nalist postponed vacating her rented flat for years giving the plea that Husain had painted her bedroom wall and the worth of that was greater than the price of the apartment. The gratitude of lady friends apart, for Husain the act of painting is fulfilling in itself. "I am not afraid to confront my weaknesses in public. I do not need to isolate myself in an ivory tower to paint like some painters do. I like to paint in front of people. Like a musician, I can concentrate in the midst of a crowd and also communicate with them in the process," he says. The boot of his Mercedes S350 always has some

roasted *chanas* (grams), canvas, paper, paint and brushes tucked away for such creative emergencies. "These can easily fit into my *jhola* (cloth bag) too and I could leave for New York with nothing else," he assures me.

Husain is believed to have developed this capacity to be able to concentrate amid chaos during his long years of struggle when he painted cinema hoardings to eke out a precarious living. He tells you about the time when he painted 40 ft hoardings for four annas a foot under the blazing sun on the open footpath in front of Badar Bagh, a chawl in central Mumbai

HUSAIN'S EXUBERANT PERSONALITY PACKS THE PANACHE OF A PICASSO AND THE DRAMA OF A DALI.

HUSAIN SPEAK

"IF I HAD BEEN IN EUROPE, I WOULD HAVE BEEN MORE GIMMICKY THAN SALVADOR DALI."

"I don't think I'll ever forget my yesterdays. I know how it is to work so hard on a hoarding that is put up for only a couple of weeks and then destroyed. Isn't it funny?"

"You live for a moment. Two hundred years from now there will be another Husain, so people of that time should watch his work and understand him. Why should people keep returning to me after 200 years? My paintings should end with my life."

"You cannot escape the logic of the market. The worth of a painting is in the eye of the buyer."

"In my art, I don't want to take a stand. One keeps changing all the time."

"HOW CAN I GO ABSTRACT WITH 500 MILLION PEOPLE AROUND ME?"

"I am essentially concerned with the human form and the mysteries of life. My paintings are a celebration of life."

"I must find a bridge between western technique and the eastern concept. That is my goal. And, of course, to show the values, the eternal values of humanity."

"How my mother longed for a day to see me a grown-up man by putting me in my father's shoes. As I grew up I became barefoot."

Excerpted from Rashda Siddiqui's In Conversation with Husain Paintings and interview given to INDIA TODAY.

My words born in you
 almost unspoken.
 I fear they are drowned
 in a still pond near the
 silent trout of villagers.
 Far flung roof tops
 sit in groups
 telling stories unknown
 to themselves.
 A piece of rope hangs round the neck of my
 courtyard well. Retold stories return to
 the pond. The piece of rope falls down
 and creeps out of courtyard.
 Yet my words are unspoken.
 Husain

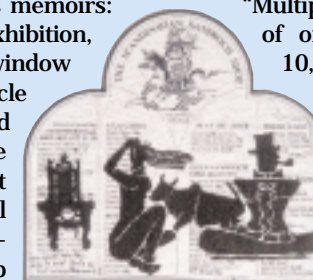


Husain

The charismatic and savvy artist single-handedly created the market for modern art in India

Husain's father worked as a timekeeper but dreamed of becoming a businessman. "He would buy 'How to Become a Businessman' books and make my uncle try his hand at one business after another. But invariably the ventures failed," recalls Husain, and then adds with a wry smile, "But his son did not do badly." Combining charisma and painterly talent, Husain learnt early how to find promoters and win buyers. What is more, he created col-

lectors just as he created art. India's first professional art gallerist Kekoo Gandhi, of Mumbai's Chemould Gallery, recalls in his memoirs: "At our first Husain exhibition, I looked out of the window and saw my wife's uncle passing by. I just pulled him in and said we needed a crowd. But Husain sold so well that after that exhibition, our sales shot up



RUNAWAY SUCCESS: Husain paints a horse at an exhibition

from Rs 5,000 to Rs 20,000 per year." Husain is a firm proponent of the gallery system even today when he no longer needs promotion. Over the decades he not only made established galleries make good money, but also helped set up new galleries.

For example, when he tired of Chemould in 1968, he helped a watch seller by the name of Kali Pundole to open the Pundole Gallery, which under Kali's son Dadibhai, now represents Sotheby's in India. Over the decades, Husain upped and upped the prices of his paintings much to the mirth of gallery owners and the chagrin of his contemporaries who accused him of turning too commercial. It is another matter that many of these artists would bank on Husain to find them buyers when their works did not sell. And invariably, Husain magnanimously obliged.

Going by today's prices an average Husain painting fetches anything between Rs 75 lakh and Rs 2 crore.

"Multiply that by half the number of oils he has painted—say 10,000—and you begin to get an idea of the wealth he has created," says Arun Vadehra of the Vadehra Gallery and representative of auction house Christie's in India. *by S. Kalidas*

where he lived for many years. From painting hoardings he progressed to designing toys and painting children's furniture for Rs 300 a month. "However, even at that time I knew that times would change and I would live by my art one day," he says. "There was a time when I painted furniture by day and my own art by night. I painted non-stop."

The times started to change slowly around the time of Independence. Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002), the *enfant terrible* of Sir JJ School of Art, spotted Husain painting away one

day by chance and immediately included him in his Progressive Artists Group (PAG). The PAG entered the art world with the manifesto of aspiring to overthrow the reign of the "second-hand European academic realists" a la Raja Ravi Varma on one hand and the "wishy-washy Indianism" of the Bengal School on the other. The PAG held its first group show in 1947 and Husain's work was noticed right from that first show. With encouragement from Rudi von Leyden, the German Jewish émigré who served as the art critic for *The*

Times of India, he held his first one-man show in 1950. With prices ranging from Rs 50 to Rs 300, the show sold out. He promptly resigned his job at the furniture factory. "I was a best seller right from start," Husain chuckles.

What set Husain apart from his PAG contemporaries is his deeply rooted "Indianness" and his celebration of life and people. Whereas Souza and S.H. Raza were busily assimilating European art from Byzantium downwards, Husain sought out his sources in the temple sculptures (Mathura and

HUSAIN'S ART IS INDIAN IN FORM AND CONTENT, YET GLOBAL IN ITS RELEVANCE AND APPEAL.

HUSAIN'S WOMEN ART

The eternal seeker of the feminine form in his works has touched the lives of several women in one way or other



Husain's mother Zainab was from Pandharpur, Maharashtra. Having lost her as a child, the nonagenarian painter still seeks her in every feminine form. "As I do not recall my mother's visage most of my female figures have no face details," says Husain. Women have, thus, been Husain's eternal muse.

The second woman to make a deep impression on Husain was Mehmooda Bibi, a widow with a son and a daughter who lived in Badar Baag Sulemani building in central Mumbai. She used to see

THE BETTER HALF: Fazila and Maqbool in Mumbai (above); Husain's portrait of confidante Rashda Siddiqui (left)



IN MOTHER'S IMAGE: Mother Teresa inspired many Husain paintings

Husain paint film hoardings under the blazing summer sun day after day and took pity on him. She invited him to eat with her family and slowly became a surrogate mother to a young Husain determined to become a painter. When Husain asked for her daughter Fazila's hand in marriage, she happily blessed the couple.

Fazila Bibi was Husain's wife. Mother of his six children. Anchor of his wandering soul. Simple homemaker. A great cook. Salt of the earth. She was not concerned with Husain's public life but saw to it that he never had to bother with the responsibilities of running a household.

"My father could not have become what he is had it not been for our mother's support," says Shamsah, Husain's painter son. Husain echos the sentiment in his autobiography. She passed away in 1998.

Husain met Maria in 1953 when he went on his first trip out of India to Czechoslovakia. Maria was his interpreter and Husain promptly fell head over heels in love with her. He showered her with 50 paintings and shaved off his beard and hair to impress her. He decided to marry her and even persuaded Fazila to agree to it. But Maria would not live in India nor be a second wife. She now lives in Melbourne with her husband. She appears as the lead character in Husain's film *Meenaxi—A Tale of Three Cities*.

A Lucknowi by birth, Rashda Siddiqui has been Husain friend and confidante for over three decades now. A sensitive aesthete she has written the book *In Conversation With Husain Paintings*. She lives in Delhi with her family.

Husain attracts women like sugar attracts flies. In his long and eventful life there have been many women who were touched by his grace in one way or other. He is still open to propositions.

by S. Kalidas



PIECE DE RESISTANCE: *Between the Spider and the Lamp* 1956

Husain. From Badri Vishal Pitti, a Hyderabad businessman for whom he painted 150 paintings based on the *Ramayana* at the behest of the late socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia, to Chester Herwitz, a handbag tycoon from Boston who bought up anything that Husain produced through the '80s. The latest Husain collector in the list is the Kolkata industrialist G.S. Srivastava who has reputedly struck a deal for 125 Husain paintings for a whopping Rs 100 crore. Srivastava has done so, not for the love of art, but on the advice of an investment banker who convinced him that Indian art was appreciating at a higher rate than most stocks. MF Husain the brand is now growing into Husain Inc.

Despite all his celebrity and wealth, Husain is personally untouched by both. "He can be as comfortable in a wayside *dhaba* dipping his *roti* in a cup of tea as in a five-star hotel relishing an expensive meal," says veteran painter and close friend Ram Kumar.

No success story is ever smooth or without blemish. And Husain has had

WOMEN HAVE BEEN HUSAIN'S ETERNAL MUSE AS HE SEEKS HIS MOTHER IN EVERY FEMININE FORM.

Khajuraho), Pahari miniature paintings and Indian folk art. "Although I owed my initial understanding of European art greatly to Souza, I also realised one did not have to paint or think like Europeans to be modern," he says. Nor did he, at any time, understand the angst of existentialism. "Alienation as a concept is alien to my nature," he maintains. In the mid-1950s Husain got national recognition with two very special canvases *Zameen* and *Between the Spider and the Lamp*. *Zameen*, which won the first prize at the first National Art Exhibition in 1955, was inspired by Bimal Roy's film *Do Bigha Zameen*. But instead of bemoaning rural poverty and indebtedness, it presents a symbolic celebration of life in rural India

EAST MEETS WEST: Maharaja Holkar with Maharani East and Maharani West



with a vibrancy never seen before.

The next year he painted a more enigmatic work and cryptically called it *Between the Spider and the Lamp*. This picture features five women reminiscent of ancient Indian sculpture with an oil lamp hanging from the top of canvas and some unintelligible words in a script that looks like ancient Sanskrit or Ardha Magadhi or some long forgotten dialect. From the hand of one woman, painted as if frozen in a *mudra* (ritualistic gesture), hangs a large spider by its thread. Some critics have alluded to the women as *pancha kanya* (Ahalya, Kunti, Draupadi, Tara and Mandodari, who are hailed as virgins even though they were married because of their innate purity) of Hindu mythology. When this painting was first shown, despite the ripples it created, no one came forth

to buy it for Rs 800. Husain decided he would never part with it for any price. A living icon of Hindu-Muslim, *ganga-jamni* culture, Husain's art is quintessentially Indian in form and content yet global in its relevance and appeal.

As modern Indian art gained wider acceptance through the '60s and '70s Husain was steadily scaling up his prices and using the media to create hype around his colourful persona and his escapades. "Life without a bit of drama is too drab," he is wont to say. Detractors screamed hoarse and friends frowned in exasperation. "When I hiked up my prices to over a lakh rupees, one of my closest friends Tyeb Mehta said I was finished as a painter," he shrugs, adding, "The fiscal worth of a painting is in the eyes of the buyer." And buyers came in droves to

FIDA BOLLYWOOD STYLE

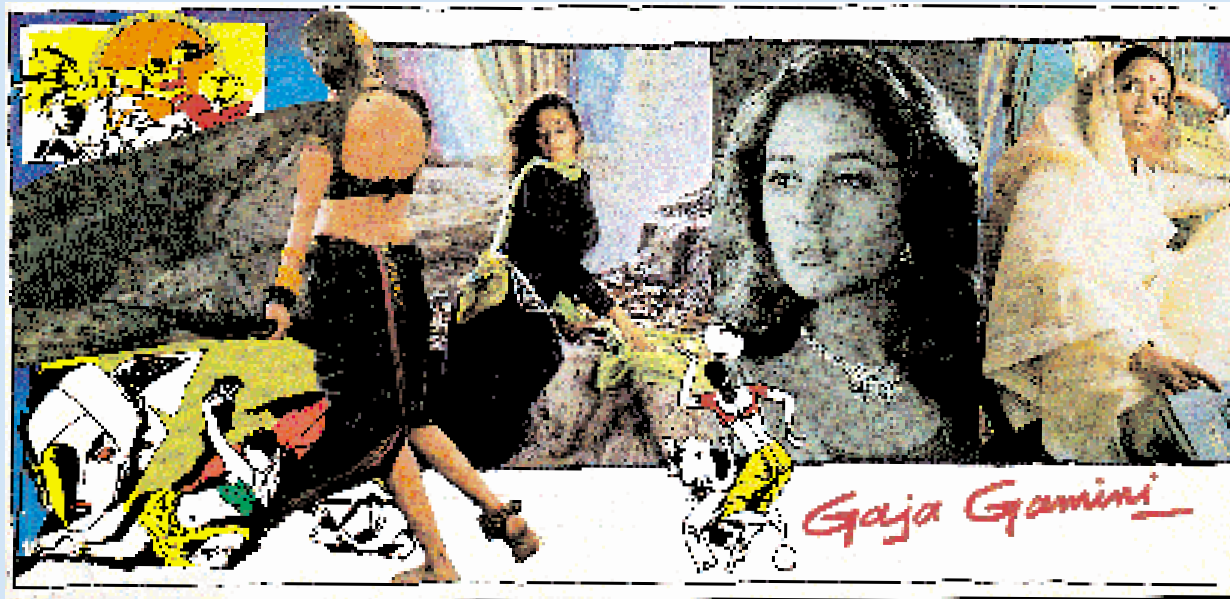
Husain's obsession with the celluloid could see him turning his own life story into a movie soon

Cinema has been M.F. Husain's biggest passion after painting. Right from the time when he saw his first silent movie as a child to the time he saw *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* a record 65 times and then followed it up by making *Gajagamini*, a cinematic ode to womanhood in the person of Madhuri Dixit. During the time he painted cinema hoardings for Bollywood producers, he recalls that

According to veteran filmmaker Mrinal Sen, after the film was completed, it baffled everyone at the FD. Sen did not know Husain at that point and was himself sceptical about it. "As chance would have it, I was in Bombay the day the final print came out. So I decided to see the film myself," recalls Sen. The film was a documentary on how an artist goes to Rajasthan to paint and the visual im-

things were over the top. But every frame of the film was like an artist's canvas," says Sen. He hadn't even met Husain then.

Later that year, Sen received an invitation from FD to celebrate the film's winning the award and he met Husain for the first time. "We have remained friends since. Every time he makes a film, he shows it to me. I have liked them in bits and pieces. Some



the only silver lining was the shooting he would get to watch to sketch the lead stars of the day. Today, after having made his third film *Meenaxi—A Tale of Three Cities*, he calls cinema the highest form of art: "Cinema has everything—form, movement, space and time."

But Husain's entry as a director was by sheer chance. In 1967, the Films Division (FD) decided to get a short film made by a non-filmmaker, M.F. Husain. Despite the bureaucracy, Husain went ahead with his usual gusto. The result was *Through the Eyes of a Painter*, a black-and-white short film shot in Rajasthan.

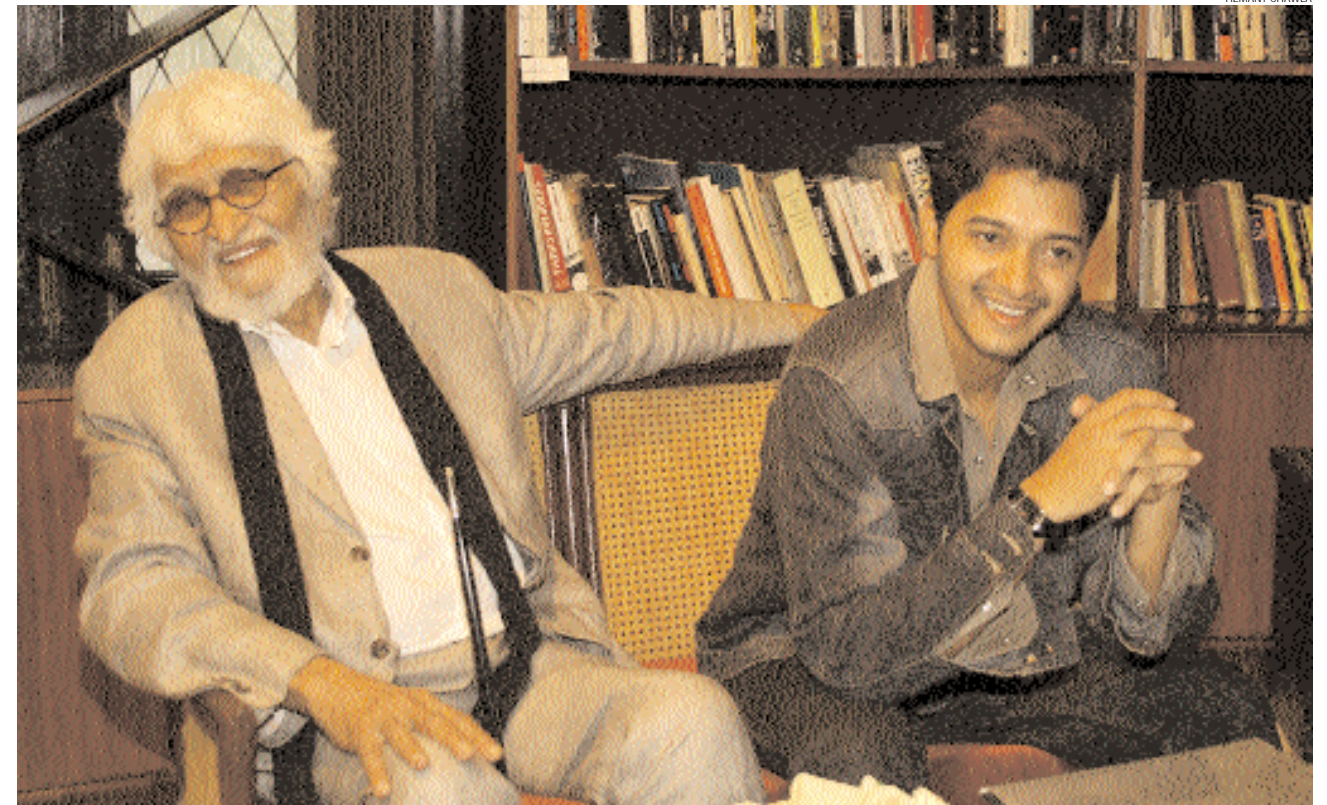
pulses he records. Sen recalls coming out of the auditorium, his eyes moist, and saying, "After watching this film I liked Rajasthan a lot more than I had ever did." He set about writing a letter to the FD explaining why the film was so remarkable. As luck would have it, the film was sent to Berlin that year, where it won the Golden Bear, the best short film award.

"I wouldn't say it was a perfect film but it was certainly a work of art. There were times when Husain had been pretentious, times when some

frames have stuck in my mind. But overall, none of his films have been able to reach the remarkable quality of his first film," says the filmmaker.

Well, Sen shall have one more Husain film to watch soon. Never one to give up a good thing easily, Husain is now planning to render his autobiography in celluloid and wants Shreyas Talpade, the hero of Nagesh Kukunoor's *Iqbal*, to play the role of young Husain.

by S. Kalidas with Swagata Sen in Kolkata



more than his share of controversies and brickbats. Many artists accuse him of commercialising art at worst and wasting his creative energies in stunts and gimmicks at best. Then there was the instance of his depicting Indira Gandhi as Bharat Mata during the Emergency which made Husain look like a political stooge. But his main antagonists have been from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh who vandalised his paintings and threatened his life for having painted the goddess Saraswati in nude. Husain reportedly apologised for the hurt caused and the controversy died its natural death. Husain brushes these criticisms off with a shrug of his broad and straight shoulders. "I hold nothing against my critics. But I do not feel the need to respond to them," he says.

What few people know

SELF IN THE OTHER: The painter wants Talpade to play young Husain is that Husain is generous to a fault with his bounty. Apart from a number of charities and art scholarships that he contributes to, there are any number of instances when he has either bought the works of needy artists or just given them money quietly.

The other remarkable facet of Husain is his interest in young people,

especially younger artists. Says sculptor Mrinalini Mukherjee: "Just last month he chanced to meet me at a gallery and asked me what I was up to. So I showed him my latest catalogue and for the next half an hour he forgot everyone else and analysed my work with deep empathy."

For his 9th decade Husain is planning a busy schedule—his fourth film (see box), exhibitions, travelling and searching for a new muse. "I meet them by the droves at every crossroad," he says. As I prepare to wind up the interview he recites a poem he wrote four decades ago:

"As I begin to paint,
Hold the sky in your hands
As the stretch of my canvas
Is unknown to me."
With a flick of his long brush he waves me adieu. It has been a long day, and he has promises to keep. ■



HUSAIN CAN CONCENTRATE IN THE MIDST OF A CROWD AND ALSO COMMUNICATE WITH THEM.