

**Gunvant Manjrekar is perhaps a pioneer of the art of Rangoli (making pictures on the ground with coloured powder). He took this form from the realm of the domestic, where women usually decorate the verandahs of their houses with various powders of different colours, to the public sphere. He is an old man now but his art has achieved some of the recognition it deserves. He himself is a respected artist in the city, and is a resident of the mill area.**

I come from Vengurla in the Konkan. It is a beautiful town. I studied here until my high school-SSC. My family was poor. My father was an artist in the court of the ruler of Baroda- Sayajirao Gaekwad. He died when I was a year old. I was an only child, and my mother had to go through a lot of suffering to bring me up. She worked in the fields as a labourer. But she saw to it that I was educated. She wanted me to grow up to be an artist like my father. This was her dream. I was too poor to be able to go to art school. My mother used to wake up early and before going to work, she would pray to the tulsī and around the plant she would make beautiful rangoli patterns every day. I too would wake up early and watch while she executed these designs. There were no brushes or colours, so the only way I could paint were with the rangoli powder. When my mother went off I would amuse myself even as a child by drawing pictures with the powder. That was how I started. I never did traditional rangoli. That way all children draw the same pictures- two mountains, and a rising sun. That's what I did too. Then I started doing portraits in Rangoli. Of Shivaji, national leaders. No one was there to teach me. I just did these on my own. But I practised and developed my style. I started enjoying what I was doing. There was no one to appreciate what I was doing either, no relatives or friends. They were not so interested in art. It was only in 1947 that got some appreciation. When my drawing teacher asked me to exhibit some of my drawings on Independence day. I said yes but can do some rangoli designs as well. He was amused that I wanted to do the rangoli that women do traditionally. I told him wanted to do a picture of Gandhiji. Nehru etc, He was surprised. I told him I had done it before but only at home. He wanted to know how much it was cost. I told him – about 32 rupees, so he said all right. We bought the colours. I did the rangoli and people were truly inspired and everyone appreciated what I had done. That was the beginning, The were amazed at how ell I could do it, where I trained etc.

One of the parents who was a merchant who commissioned me to do rangoli during the religious discourses. He wanted me to do pictures on Puranic themes. The pictures I did were on the life on Shiva. I copied it from a picture, because I had not yet learnt to make pictures from memory. I was only 14 years old. People would show their appreciation by giving me things to eat, or some money. I was encouraged. Then I was asked to create rangoli pictures in many places around my village. People had not thought that one could use rangoli to draw portraits and scenes. There was no black colour in rangoli, so I used to powder coal or use black ink mixed with sand.

When I came to Bombay at first it was for a job, so I did not get any chance to draw. I used to stay with my uncle. During Diwali my cousin sisters asked me to draw outside the house. I drew a picture of Subhash Chandra Bose. People were so impressed that they would stand in line to see it. I realised that this is a novel idea and I did my first exhibition on Sane Guruji's life. This was in Chabildas School and it was organised someone called Redkar in an organisation in Santa Cruz. Many came to see it. I thought to myself- I should take up issues and use my imagination to explain them. The issues I was interested in. This was the time of the Samyukta Maharashtra movement so I made this my theme. Acharya Atre opened the exhibition. Atre told me I should paint. He took me to his bungalow. I used to go to all his functions. He would always call me. There was a bust of him that I liked and he immediately told me to take it. He was a very warm and friendly man. I did many exhibitions after that. Most of them had political themes. The firings during the Samyukta Maharashtra when 105 people died, this was such a terrible event. I drew a rangoli picture where Ram Shastri of the old days had come back to life and was accusing the government. This picture became very famous. I drew this in Shivaji Mandir theatre in the hall. My interest grew in political themes both national and international.

I still did not have any formal art education and no longer felt the need either! I did go to art school for two years. When I applied for a job in Hindustan Petroleum, in 1954 I told the American management that I had done two years of art school but I had not got my diploma. They said I did not need a diploma and gave me the job as an art publicist. In 55-60 the company asked me to do displays for the company which I did, in different parts of the country. In the Industrial Fair in Delhi in 1955 I was there for a month I also did some rangoli pictures. Many famous visitors came to see it- leaders like Nehru, Rajendra Prasad etc.. We had put a glass cover on the Rangoli so that it should not spoil. So I never finished my course. I worked in the company for 15 years. There was no scope for promotion and my boss said if I wanted a promotion I would have to change my line. There was another senior officer called Mody and he asked me to learn

drafting and join the design engineering department. I said I did not know the ABC of drafting. He said I could learn. He said he would give me one more promotion. He was an admirer of my rangoli art. Sure enough I learnt the job and I later became the Senior Designer. I retired as Chief Maintenance Engineer.

I was close to the socialists and the communists and this influence is obvious in my art. I was in the Rashtriya Seva Dal. Every week end I would go for 'shram daan' -- donating labour for a cause like working in the dalit bastis, building roads etc. There are certain values that one imbibes through one's intellectual and emotional responses, through contact with good people. This certainly influenced my drawings.

Rangoli is a popular art. It can be appreciated by rich and poor alike. It is a socialist art form. Abstract art is inaccessible to ordinary people. Only art lovers can appreciate it. For the rich it is often just fashionable to be art lovers even when they do not understand art. They say – wonderful wonderful and buy it to put it up on their walls. The real art lovers are different, those who understand and appreciate and enjoy the paintings. Rangoli is a popular art, a social art, one that is practiced by every woman rich or poor outside the house. The main limitation is that it is temporary and it cannot be put up on a wall. You would have to use chemicals for that. I have developed the art. When you paint with water colours you start from light shades and go on to dark. In oils you start from darker colours and go on to lighter shades. In Rangoli you use a combination. In some parts you use the former method and in other parts you use the latter. When doing portraits. This is not an art that is taught in art schools. I taught students, on the weekends in a four months course. I have taught about 10000 students but where is the encouragement? People like it but the those in power have never paid attention. So it has no future that I can see. I taught until 1975. What is the future for this art? I had some money because I had a good job, but if there is no support others will not be able to spend their own money and practice it.

There are 25 shades in Rangoli. Black was a problem. I had tried many things, and then I settled for chemical and vegetable dye mixed with rangoli powder. It is hard work. You cannot finish it over time like a canvas. Once you start you have to finish it. I work for 15 hours at a stretch sometimes in order to complete a painting.

There have been Rangoli exhibitions during cultural festivals, but it is not regular. I have had exhibitions all over the country and it had received much attention. But there has never been an

award for a Rangoli artist. Not one. There are very few people who are doing something to encourage the art. I am associated with some of them. We also help poor students, tribal youth etc. My art is not separate from my political opinions. I am not an activist, but my association with political leaders and organisations have been important to me. I even did banners for candidates. Once when I did a banner for Arjunrao Vichare, people who saw the banner started to ask who had done it. When Arjunrao saw it he came to see me. He wanted me to organise the party in my area. He was my guest so I could not be rude but I did say- I was active in the party earlier so I made the banner. Because the leaders starting from Ashoke Mehta have destroyed the organisation.

In the election between Vamanrao Mahadik and the communists there was a lot of support for him and from then on the communist lost their foothold.

Now the Sena has left the cause of the Maharashtrians and they have started talking about Hindutva, etc. This is what the older generation feel. Shahir Sable is my neighbour and he too feels the same way.

Artists and others were also inspired by the call of Shiv Sena but only for the cause of the Marathi people. But now the only cause is money. Did the Sena do anything for the artists and performers among the Maharashtrians? Did they come and say- do an exhibition for us or did they ask the shahirs- perform on our stage? So the artists distanced themselves later. The Sena which was an organisation of the Marathi people did not go on to do anything for that cause.

What does this generation want? They do not have political knowledge or interest. In the computer and technological age what is the political future?

I am from the Konkan and I have seen what has been happening to the mill workers. They are Marathi but they are being ruined and displaced. There are many I have seen who have gone back to their villages and are struggling to eat a single meal. There are some who just gave up and committed suicide. This age belongs to the mill owners because they have diversified into other industries at the cost of the mills and the workers have nowhere to go. Where government has bothered to do anything about stopping the sale of mill land, some of the workers have been saved. Nothing happens to the mill owners. They are doing well for themselves because they are in other industries. The workers who built this city have no place in it anymore.