

Delhi

## Gieve Patel and the art of friendship

*Poet, painter, playwright Gieve Patel died a year ago. At a special exhibition and discussion dedicated to his memory in Delhi, some of the veteran artists of India, his friends, sat around a table talking Gieve, man and art.*



Sudhir Patwardhan's 'Marine Drive'

**Paramita Ghosh**

Updated on: 28 Nov 2024, 9:12 am · 5 min read



The end of The Iliad is marked by two funerals and a rage. In the 23rd book of the epic poem, the great Greek hero Achilles mourns the death of his friend Patroclus with lamentations, funeral games, feasts, war cries. Over the corpse of Hector, the mourning is quieter, deeper.

Something of the latter spirit hung over an evening gathering in Delhi recently in memoriam of Bombay poet, painter, playwright Gieve Patel. Patel died a year ago; for his friends, there has been no closure. At Delhi's Vadehra Art Gallery, seven of his friends and artists – Sudhir Patwardhan, Ranjit Hoskote, Gulam Mohammed and Nilima Sheikh, Ranbir Kaleka, and Anju and Atul Dodiya – sat around a table talking about him in what can only be called an uninterrupted public wake, whose object seems to have been the creation of memory about Patel, so as to talk about his place and the place of his art in their lives, and in the world.

Gieve Patel developed his art in parallel to what is called the 'Baroda Group', of which India's second-generation Modernists – Bhupen Khakhar, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Nalini Malani and Sudhir Patwardhan – were members. Some of his subjects are marginal figures, ironic anti-portraits, a unique depiction of violence, and birds and animals as part of the human being's ecosystem mirroring his fate.

A special exhibition, titled, 'A Show of Hands', curated by poet, critic, playwright Ranit Hoskote was also mounted on the occasion. The exhibition featuring a collection of works by artists Aditi Singh, Anju Dodiya, Atul Dodiya, Areez Katki, Biraaj Dodiya, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Jitish Kallat, Mahesh Baliga, Nilima Sheikh, Ranbir Kaleka, Ratheesh T., Sudhir Patwardhan and Sujith S.N. is on view across Vadehra's modern and contemporary gallery spaces till January 10, 2025.



(L-R) Critic and curator of the 'A Show of Hands' exhibition, Ranjit Hoskote, with artists Ranbir Kaleka, Nilima Sheikh and Atul Dodiya at Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi

### **A small circle**

The walls of the gallery drew out various nuances of the friendships. Patwardhan's oil-on-canvas painting, 'Marine Drive', for instance, is in memory of a few-monthly ritual between the Patel and Patwardhan. It could well be an image of any meeting between middle-class friends sitting on a ledge by the sea with a thermos in the middle, not unlike the moods of many of Patel's own works on everyday working-class lives.

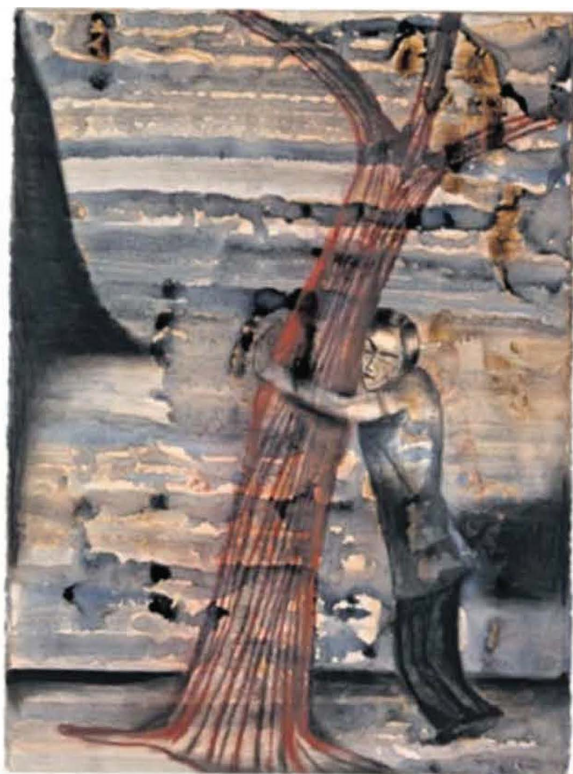
"Gieve would be there after having closed his clinic at Lamington Road and I'd reach there after closing mine at Thane. His was not a large circle of friends, he'd choose his friends and give importance and energy to those relationships," says Patwardhan of a friendship that began with Patel thinking: "Here comes another doctor and a Sunday painter who wants me to look at his work!"

Nilima Sheikh and Anju Dodiya, friends of Patel's from different times in his life, spoke of his generosity towards their work. Sheikh talked about how Patel's mention of her 'Champa' series at the influential Asia Society gathering in New York led to an academic interest in her work. Dodiya touched upon what Patel had 'taught' her by example.

"We both made 'Daphne' [in Greek mythology the nymph Daphne metamorphoses into a tree to escape Apollo's lust]. Gieve captured her in the moment flesh becomes a tree. I painted her in the theatre of her heroism. He favoured the gentle mutation and showed how it can be far more moving and violent. He taught me that you don't always have to have an epic tone."

### **Universe of compassion**

Patel's poem 'On Killing a Tree', every ICSE-educated kid's first introduction to him – including Hoskote's – by the time s/he is in her/his mid-teens, was recited by the poet-critic with great self-restraint as if through the "hack and chop", "the bleeding bark" and the pulling out of the root in Patel's lines, he was reliving in some way his experience of the livingness and the death of his mentor and friend.



Anju Dodiya's 'Father'

Patel's love for the natural world, and his looking at the fact of mortality through it came up several times during the evening. On many a walk, Hoskote recalled Patel pointing out the violence in the entanglement of trees even as many a weekend appointment was spent under the abundant shade of one.

Hoskote also talked of the fecundity and violence, "poles within which so much of his work was dramatised". Speaking after the event, he elaborated on Patel dedicating the poem 'Moult' to him struck by the way Hoskote had created in his play, a contemporary figure out of Karna — a character at the heart of the tragedy and the violence of the Mahabharata.

"By that time, Gieve had written on Eklavya. He was interested in the threshold figures of the epics caught between classes and states of being; with the interplay of generosity and vulnerability that involved both these characters' act of giving. [Eklavya surrenders his thumb as guru dakshina to Drona and ends his future as an archer; Karna gives up to his mother his armour, which made him invincible, thus signing his death warrant.]"

### **An art of courage**

An art of understatement, an opinion of extremes — such was the clay that formed Gieve Patel's life and his art, said his friends. "There are only 15 artists or poets worth talking of' — that's a typical Gieve statement. Of course, Gieve could be wrong—but you need guts to say it, and to hold on to those opinions," recalled Patwardhan with a laugh. "When one thinks of Gieve one thinks of extremes — of emotion, of opinion. My comment may seem off the mark as in life he was a gentle man — his work showed up the extremes. I mean who would want to look at the innards of a crushed rat? He was brave enough."

Courage apart, Patel's curiosity to look closely at brutality — whether in the natural world or the human, in man-animal relationships — also informed his bare-boned form, or the breaking down of conventional 'form' in his paintings. Anju Dodiya recalled her first impressions of Patel's Joan of Arc, a a graphite and charcoal triptych after the Joan of Carl Dreyer's film (Passion of Joan of Arc). "I felt it was linear. He said she was a young girl, not yet a woman. I understood that he had a unique way of deciding the approach. Once he was certain of what and how he was going to paint, there was not to be a line more."

Patwardhan, too, talked of his later figures such as 'Battered Man in a Landscape' in this context. "His earlier works had more volume, his later figures were flat; he wouldn't put an outline to a figure, for example, or, use a technique to make a stronger impression. Shading can be a lie to bring conviction to form." As the evening wound down, there was talk of taking the exhibition to Mumbai, or mounting it in another form to talk of another aspect of his work. Gieve Patel's body of art has a long life ahead.

[Follow The New Indian Express channel on WhatsApp](#)

[Download the TNIE app to stay with us and follow the latest](#)