



The new avataar of Uday Raj Gadnis



Newsline
WEDNESDAY ■ MARCH 29, 2000

In his latest avatar as a Jain Sadhu, the artist formerly known as Udayraj Gadnis talks to Yogesh Pawar about moksha, spiritual art and ah yes! the 'very exciting' Chelsea Clinton

Hey Ram!

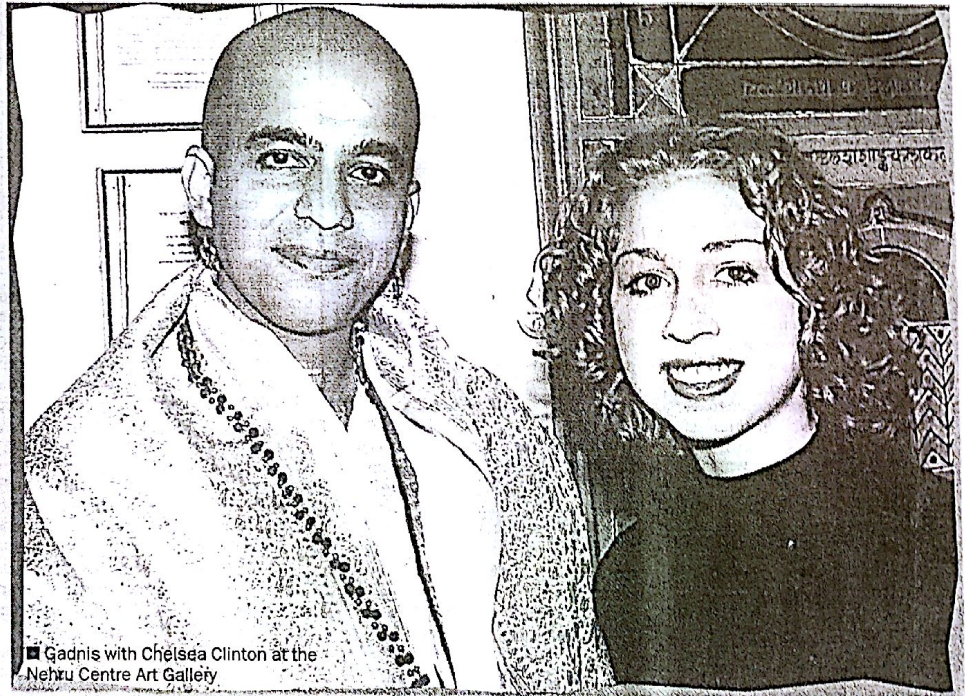
“OPEN your mind to see the true colours... you need to go beyond what you see on the canvas. The anubhuti of the parmatma is all that should remain, and you will experience bliss,” the swami imparts the knowledge to over 200 adherents squatting in front of him. Some of the devout sitting for the “enlightening” discourse even fold their hands fervently and bow down, leaving you foxed.

This ain't no temple. It's the Nehru Centre Art Gallery, and you are at a spiritual art exhibition. The painter — a 'past-master-at-calculated-brand-positioning', Uday Raj Gadnis — is behind the mask of a tonsured, wrapped-in-silks image, attracting the aforementioned genuflections in his latest avatar. Minus his mane, Gadnis has packaged himself as a Jain swami, rechristening himself with a mouthfully alliterative name — Saadhak Shiv-anand Saraswati. Your thoughts go back to the conversation you've just had with him.

“If people want to fit me in this slot, who am I to say no?” he asks, adding: “In fact, I feel privileged that I am the chosen one.” And how an employee with the Taj's HRD department became a painter and then a swami is no mystery. After all, here's one man who can get back to aggressive plugging for himself with well-organised PR, press releases et al in the same breath. “After all, the media can make or break a person,” he says with folded hands, trying hard to keep the false face of a serene swami. This carefully yet cleverly carved relationship with the public even brought him the rare honour of a visit by none other than Chelsea Clinton at the Nehru Centre. “I insisted that she and her entire security entourage remove their shoes since this is a religious exhibition,” he informs proudly, and goes on to say: “She spent over half-an-hour here and showed keen interest in Indian spirituality.”

But it's simply a case of the real Gadnis trying to knock it off that he can't resist talking about how well-endowed the star guest is. “Man”, he says in that loaded way. “When we were posing for a picture she ended up brushing me with *them*,” he says with the good old mischievous glint in his eyes. “It took quite an effort to maintain distance from her.” Wonder how the most powerful President on earth will react when he hears of the artist's impression of his daughter!

Like all his other series, Gadnis' Bhaktamar series too has a dramatic tale (his Panchamahabhatani series “was inspired by a rainstorm that broke open my studio doors leaving me drenched.” Dunno why nobody's ever asked him how none of the canvases kept there got ruined.) “I felt I had completed a complete circle of ten years in my creative quest for peace and tranquillity. Around New Year, I met the Jain master Gurudev Jai Sundar Vijayji Maharaj and was ordained a *munni* after I fell at his feet,” he says, his entire demeanour going back to being one. From his gestures — his right palm extended — to his slow speech in hushed overtones. According to Gadnis: “After my or-



■ Gadnis with Chelsea Clinton at the Nehru Centre Art Gallery

were refused a venue by Jehangir Art Gallery. Says K G Menon, secretary of the gallery: “We want nothing to do with Gadnis. He is very overbearing and has tonnes of attitude which we could do well by keeping out of this gallery.”

Also, what Gadnis conveniently leaves out about his works is the mention of seniors like S P Palshikar, Jagannath Ahirwasi and S H Raza (in fact, Gadnis met Raza in 1991 at the Taj and took to painting under his tutelage. The artist's influence is directly seen in Gadnis' work), who have already established their presence in

dainment, I lived for 48 days on boiled *mung* (Bengal gram) and warm water in January. It brought out whatever I had internalised from my guru.” And yet this *munni* has a very different set of renunciatory standards. Or else how would one explain the turmeric yellow silk *dhoti*, the heavily spangled white silk shawl and the shoulder-length earrings. The man must, however, be given the credit for sheer amount of precise he puts into all his makeovers. “I have arrived! Now where is the journey? Only the destination... I have arrived at my Satvic Guna — the *munni* in me!” he says with his eyes almost shut. And if any of you readers can figure that one out I want to be your disciple.

Gadnis would like to believe that he is the one who pioneered the spiritual art movement with his tantric art and emphasises: “I have made *tapascharya* and *riyaz* as the foundations of the *adhy-atmik chitrukala gharana*. It is my endeavor to see that more and more people from this land of spirituality begin to understand and appreciate this art form better.” No wonder his paintings

the spiritual art when Gadnis must still be perfecting holding the brush with a steady hand. It's true that the earlier generation had a strong influence from the West, from like of Walter Langhammer, R Selesinger and Rudivon Leyden. And Gadnis has broken away from that mould to find very ethnic metaphors in the way he chooses form and colour, not giving the seniors their due. How unfair! But then if there are people like Amitabh Bachchan to add value to his works, then who are we. Says the Big B: “His work is exemplary. Watching his paintings is an intensely spiritual experience.” As for the works in the Bhaktamar series, this exhibition sees return of Gadnis to a very clever use of geometric forms with very Indian colours — vermilion red, mustard, yellow, black and blue, as opposed to the Panchamahabhatani series. The tantric yantras he painted used similar technique.

It was January 22, 1997 that Gadnis had said: “I want my art to shock people out of the castrated social spirituality.” One wonders whether he has achieved this.