



Feroze Gujral

Living Legacy

Feroze Gujral recalls a home shaped by art, where life shimmered in its company.

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We're an old civilisation, a very young country," says Feroze Gujral, as she speaks about the ways Indian art is still interpreted through Western frameworks, a perspective she challenges through Satish Gujral's centenary exhibition.

Gujral's memories move through lived space rather than chronology. They are shaped by proximity and observation, by time spent in a household where art was not an object but a way of life. As a young woman in Delhi, she found herself swept into a household pulsing with ideas, art, and generosity. The presence of artists and intellectuals was constant along with the understanding that creative life demanded endurance as much as inspiration. Through her

recollections, Satish Gujral's work emerges not as a fixed legacy but as a lived process—formed through travel, political awareness, and sustained engagement with scale and public space. To encounter the artist's work through Gujral's lens is to follow a practice forged through risk and persistence, one that insists on art as something situated firmly within the world it seeks to address.

Harper's Bazaar: Where do your memories of Satish Gujral begin?

Feroze Gujral: I met him when I was 18-year-old, married soon after, and stayed with them for a few years as a young bride. So I would say that was really the beginning. It was the first time I was living in India, that too in Delhi. It was an unusual house to be married into, because they



were both artists. My mother-in-law was a ceramicist, and they were generous, open, happy, creative, and very political. It was also an incredibly exciting household because there were endless people coming through—dancers, writers, theatre people, poets. I miss that now. I feel we are all very segregated in our own silos today, but at that time it was very much a melting pot, and it was fantastic for me, growing up in that house.

HB: How has his presence as a multidisciplinary artist influenced your journey in the realm of art?

FG: I think it wasn't so much his practice. It started more practically. Mohit [Gujral] and I wanted to give him a gift for his birthday almost 18 years ago, and we couldn't think of anything.

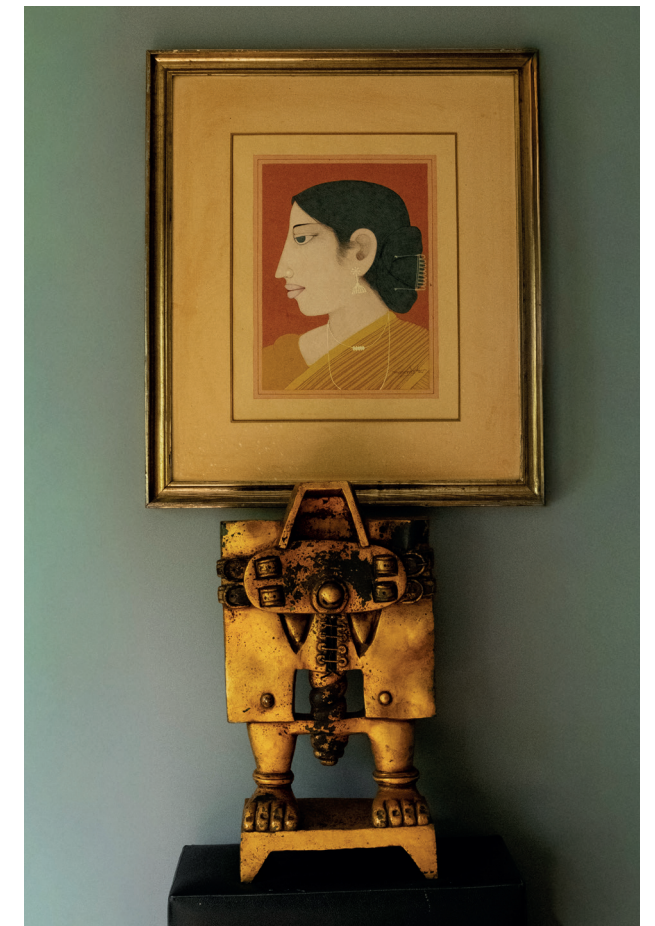
At the same time, a lot of people were constantly coming to him asking for help. Practically every week there would be someone, from very small requests, like help framing a work for a show, to much larger ones, like needing funds to travel abroad for a scholarship. There was always someone asking for help. So we said this is the part we're going to do. We started very quietly, very simply. It was really about giving back, and that remains our primary focus even now.

HB: Was there a particular moment or experience that inspired you to start giving back to the arts?

FG: From the very onset, in 2008, we decided we were going to give back. We set aside a certain amount every year, and that was that. It wasn't really thought of as patronage. For us, it was about giving back to the arts, to a community we were familiar with and directly connected to his journey. He had struggled a lot and made it through, and we saw it with the others too—painters, dancers, people whose work didn't always pay, who might get paid sometimes and not always.

So even now, "patron" feels like a big word. We're just giving. Maybe over the last 10 or 12 years it has become more strategic, thinking about what we're doing, how it makes a difference, where funding is most needed, where mentorship or direction is required.

HB: He was one of the first Indian artists to go to Mexico, where he spent his days with Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. How did that experience shape him?



Inside Gujral's home



FG: If you read his autobiography, there's a stunning chapter about this. He received a scholarship from Octavio Paz, who later became a Nobel laureate, and was sent off on a journey. At the time, it was just a scholarship. He was young, like any other student. I don't think anyone could have realised how far Mexico would take him. He spent months travelling, fell in love with the place, interned with Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, and was taught by some of the great muralists, including David Alfaro Siqueiros.

What strikes me most is that he was a deaf young man from India, not speaking the language, without money, getting on a boat and landing on the other side of the world. That built tremendous resilience and fearlessness in him. He was exposed to political narratives in public space, huge murals, art on walls meant for everyone. That was his first real understanding of scale and of communicating through art in a public way. That stayed with him for life.

HB: How did that period of his life inform the art and work he made in India?

FG: When he came back, he was commissioned to do major murals around India Gate. He remains the only muralist in India who worked at that kind of scale, at the Delhi High Court, at Baroda House, across public buildings, universities, and hotels.

These were enormous ceramic murals, sometimes spanning several floors. Mexico gave him this sense of scale and public responsibility. Later, of course, that led him into architecture, because he understood buildings, façades, and how people experience space. Architecture was a natural extension of that thinking.

HB: *Satish Gujral: A Century in Form, Fire, and Vision*, opened on January 9 at the National Gallery of Modern Art. When you first saw this exhibition coming together, what struck you most?

FG: It's been a very long labour of love, research, discovery, and putting things into some kind of order. We looked for works, found collectors, spoke to them about when and why they acquired them.

You see changes in technique and material: very basic boards early on because there was no money, collages made from magazines, oil paintings, three-dimensional mixed-media experiments. Each phase corresponds to a period in his life.

For us, it has also been about archiving. We already have an archive, but now we're working toward a proper physical



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archive where people can come and study, and research. When I see the exhibition fully installed, I think I'll be quite awestruck by the sheer determination and length of practice. It's rare to see someone stay so committed for so long.

HB: What does marking Satish Gujral's centenary mean to you personally, beyond its public significance?

FG: In recent years, we've seen centenary moments for many modern masters, but often only fragments of their work. I didn't see a full line, from where they began to where they ended.

This exhibition tries to show a life from zero to a hundred. It's taken five years of thinking and two-and-a-half years of active work. Along the way, we rediscovered works and reconnected with people, who shared stories and memories. It's been very enriching.

HB: What do you think his work asks of us today?

FG: I think it's a reminder. Today, so much art is made with the end goal of selling. That pressure is real, life is expensive, but being an artist is something else. It's a calling. I know so many artists whose work was beautiful, but they couldn't continue. I met one recently who told me he's now a computer engineer and hasn't made art in twenty years. It made me cry.

This story is about perseverance. It says: this is a gift, and you have to fight for it. We also have a responsibility to make sure artists can afford to keep creating.

HB: Did he ever speak about legacy?

FG: No. I don't think he ever thought about it. That's what legends do, they just work. He was joyous, energetic, and incredibly well-read. Having lived through Partition and great loss, he still had a lightness about him. For me, legacy is about not losing what we have. [It is about] Preserving the work, sharing it, and building from it. Being in the arts makes that easier, but it's still a great responsibility.

HB: Is there a particular memory or conversation that influences the way you move through the world?

FG: Once he showed me a painting and asked if I liked it. I said I didn't. He was delighted. He said, 'Good. If you hate it, it's done its job.' That stayed with me. Art must provoke a reaction. Indifference means failure. He also believed deeply that life itself is art, that everything is precious. It's a simple idea, but a powerful one. ■

Satish Gujral: A Century in Form, Fire, and Vision, curated by Kishore Singh, opened on January 9 at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.