
Jogen Chowdhury A search for identity

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With the Partition, young Jogen and his family were forced to leave their home at Kotalipara in East Bengal. They started life anew as 'East Bengal refugees' in a large alien city, Calcutta. In the refugee colony where he lived with his family, Jogen set up literary clubs like the Sahitya Sabha and Yuva Vahini. The radical young poet Sukanto Bhattacharjee was his source of inspiration.

Like other young intellectuals of Calcutta, Jogen, too, was influenced by the Leftist ideology. Though he was never actively involved in politics, he hoped that through this struggle, a new social order would emerge. But it did not take him too long to realise that Leftist politics was not the answer to the contemporary social problems.

Jogen's admission into the Government college of Art and Crafts, Calcutta in 1955 gave a new direction to his life. The Art College already had a rich tradition behind it. It was here, under the influence of E.B.Havell, that Abanindranath Tagore had started the famous Bengal School Movement. At the time of Jogen's admission, the romanticism associated with the Bengal School still pervaded the college atmosphere. The paintings of great masters like Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose and Jamini Roy were prominently displayed. While doing sketches at the Indian Museum, Jogen discovered traditions of ancient Indian sculpture. He realised that for a work of art to be successful, it was not just a matter of acquired skill. Through his art, the artist had to express the inner rhythm or the pulse of life.

Jogen's line drawing exercises as a student showed his talent. His powerful charcoal drawings of refugees at the Sealdah station expressed not only his confidence and skill, but also his ability to portray the psychology of the subject portrayed. Although at this stage he did paint some pictures in the Bengal School tradition, the challenges inherent in drawing attracted Jogen. His early works were primarily small black and white drawings done with great detail. He chose this particular medium because it suited his temperament and was economical at the same time. Pen, ink and newsprint were certainly cheaper than oil on canvas, or even watercolours, or pastel on paper. The black background and the crosshatching associated with Jogen's style had its origin during the 1960s, reflecting the economic hardship and emotional stress the artist was experiencing then. Though a streak of Bharatiyata or Indianness was present in Jogen's works, it was still very vague.

His stay in Paris as a student at the Ecole Nationale superieure des Beaux Arts in 1968 finally gave clarity to his thoughts. For the first time he came face to face with the Modern Art Movement which had revolutionised the entire western concept on art. Though dynamic and revolutionary, Jogen felt that this movement had emerged out of Europe's own historical, cultural and intellectual experiences and therefore it would be a mistake to transplant it to India where it had no relevance. Just as Amrita Sher-Gil had earlier discovered her 'Indianness' in Europe, Jogen's stay in Paris was a path to self-discovery. He realised that if Indian art was to create new dynamic vocabulary, Indian artists had to chart out their own course of action without looking to the West for inspiration. Jogen rejected the path chosen by the 'Progressive' artists in India. He wanted to have a separate identity, search for his own roots.

Going back to the Bengal School tradition was not the answer. Unlike the Modern Art Movement, the Bengal School too was a reflection of its own time and experience which was no longer relevant.

When he returned to Calcutta in 1968, the city was in a state of political turmoil. The violent Naxalite Movement had started. Disillusioned and confused, Jogen took up designing at the Madras Handloom Board. His experience as a textile designer helped Jogen to further his interests in the linear elements in Indian art.

In 1973, he moved to Delhi as the Curator of Rashtrapati Bhavan. It was during his stay in Delhi that Jogen began to emerge as an individualistic artist with his own original style. For 15 years Jogen had what he would describe as the 'ringside' view of public life. The hypocrisy, sycophancy and corruption among politicians and bureaucrats gave Jogen the themes for his art. He was amused to find that people around him had no commitments, honesty or sincerity towards the country they were there to serve.

The tool he used to express his attitude towards them was his art.

Unlike Abanindranath Tagore and Amrita Sher-Gil, Jogen did not fall back on India's past traditions or the modern art movement in the West, but on the familiar world of Bengal folk or patua traditions. With the clever use of sinuous lines and crosshatching, Jogen now began to create voluminous and ungainly forms, which he set against a dark background. Making use of satire and expressive distortions, Jogen began to create a world of disturbing beauty. Like the Kalighat patua's caustic visual statement against the decadent world of the effete 'Baboos' and their courtesans of the 19th century Bengal, Jogen created portraits of corrupt and greedy politicians, bureaucrats, fallen actresses, as well as of aging men and women in compromising

situations. These were unlike the Kalighat painter's depiction of idealised courtesans and their foppish dandies done in bold sweeping lines and brilliant colours. Jogen's use of fine lines and dense crosshatching in dark monochrome colours and highly distorted forms created a world of dream-like fantasy and sad humour. Some of his famous works of this period are *Tiger in the Moonlight*, and *Binodini*.

In 1987 Jogen left Delhi and moved to Santiniketan, where he joined Kala Bhavan. After years of living away, Jogen had come back to his roots in rural Bengal. The quiet idyllic life in Santiniketan brought about changes in his works. Instead of bureaucrats and businessmen, nature became a predominant theme. There was a change in style and medium too, and experimenting with pure lines was his next phase. Questions like how a simple black and white line drawing can become a work of art began to preoccupy him. Like a Haiku poet, with the help of just a few bold strokes Jogen was able to express the pulsating rhythm of life inherent in nature. Flowers, creepers, fish and birds now became dominant motifs in his works. His lines were bold and free, unlike those in his earlier introverted drawings. This new phase began to reflect Jogen's change in attitude both towards himself and the world around him. His days of struggle were over. This experimentation led him to further simplification and indigenous identity. In the rural environment of Santiniketan, elements of the Bengal scroll painting traditions began to emerge in his works. The earlier dark, almost monochromatic colours gave way to the brilliant colours associated with rural folk art traditions. His earlier sculptured forms made way for two-dimensional linear forms.

Over the years, Jogen has struggled consistently, and has been successful in creating a new Indian idiom in art. But he does not consider himself a revivalist. According to him, his mission has not been to counter the art movement in the West, but to make a creative contribution to the world of art as a whole. What pioneers like Abanindranath Tagore and Amrita Sher-Gil had set out to achieve earlier in this century, Jogen Chowdhury has finally brought to fruition.

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