

Jogen Chowdhury: Smearing The Ghost with Ink

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Autobiographical Persona

Jogen Chowdhury's autobiographical narrative reads a little like Satyajit Ray's version of *Apu Trilogy*.¹ Although Jogen's father was not a poor priest but a Zamindar in Faridpur, in East Bengal, and although Jogen's family experienced poverty when they came to Calcutta in 1948 as refugees,² there is some resemblance in the form of relating a child's travel followed by his youthful inspiration to become a sovereign artist. The analogy with the almost-archetypal Apu story lies in the convention that Jogen assumes for bridging the past with the present, the country and city: a rite of passage acted out by a sensitive boy in the city of Indian cities— Calcutta!

Jogen went to the college of art in Calcutta and finished there in 1960. He had just made his entry into the art world when he was awarded a scholarship to study in Paris. This was during the years 1965-70 and he ended the study period with a brief stay in London. This is an experience that he tells via another convention: the native post colonial aspirant who is first overwhelmed by western culture—its knowledge system and creative achievements that give it political hegemony— then recognizes the signs of seduction. The inner quest for autonomy coupled with a sense of belonging to a complex and contemporary culture in India, see him through to his identity. After the crisis, of making the correct choice, of finding an enduring ethic, he is freed from the devouring power of the alien culture and becomes an authentic individual in his own society.

Art is ultimately involved with the manner of living. Hence art cannot manifest itself in its totality until the question of living has been clearly defined at the personal plane and the larger social plane. As long as that is not accomplished, all that we can have is fragmented, undefined expressions.³

The word organic often features in Jogen's vocabulary, whether he is talking about nature and its proliferations; or whether he is talking of pictorial forms as being organically conceived; or of the human body as an elaborate organism in continuity with nature. Spoken in a didactic mode, Jogen offers irrepressible evidence about an artist's culturally honed integrity. At the end of the long narrative, however, one can surmise that he is by no means hostile to western modernism (indeed deeply attracted and beholden to the great art of the century). But that he quite consciously

positions himself as an organic artist and intellectual identifying himself with those transforming agents who work within the terms of a local culture. By such 'true-to-the-soil' aesthetic Jogen believes that the artist contributes to a national cultural renewal, and indeed to a more balanced universality.

Breakthroughs come when we oppose accepted practices, so it is important that as Indian artists we should develop a resistance where necessary. Even while we are open to influence we should reject what does not go with our social circumstances or psyche. It will be wiser to recognize our differences and to turn to the local, not to be ethnic but to be creative in new ways that are specially available to us.⁴

Cultural Environment

Jogen is emphatic about positioning himself as an artist-in-society and emphatic to the point of being literal about the choice of subject-matter being identifiably Indian. Yet the context he names is not history and tradition, but something more developing like environment—assuming probably that the term has a fairly sweeping anthropological import.

Jogen was too young to depict the horror of the 1943 Bengal Famine that turned several Bengal artists into crusaders for the poor—for the peasants forced on to the Calcutta streets in a condition of terminal hunger by the exploitative policies of the colonial regime. The Famine featured in the work of artist as diverse as Ram Kinker Baij and Atul Bose and in the drawings and graphics of the communist artists, Zainal Abedin, Chittaprasad and Somenath Hore. Jogen saw exhibitions of some of these artists when he was a student and in some ways this, with the powerful mediation of Kathe Kollwitz's lithographs (that he saw exhibited at that time in Calcutta's Indian Museum), affected his next set of works. Jogen ended art school career with large pastel drawings of homeless refugees camping at the Sealdah Station.

He had developed leftist leanings in the 1950s (both his brothers were communists during this period) and though he never joined any Party, Jogen was involved with all manner of group activity around progressive forms of literature, cinema, theatre. The cultural context in Bengal, endowed with a reflexive regional language of the arts, provided a wide-ranging *representational* project.

While Jogen seems to have been a natural heir to the near contemporary language of representation devised in Calcutta's urban milieu from the nineteenth century, he put it to conscious use only after returning from Europe. The generic expressionism of his art school days in Calcutta and Paris turned into a more intimate, a more neighbourly representation of the Indian middle class in an altogether different

generic form: a cross-reference to the motifs and language of Kalighat *patas* and related bazaar prints, became recognizable.⁵ Jogen worked out an iconography ranging from archetypal images to stereotypes, from intimate and subjective characterization to caricature. Including as his work did, defunct deities and corrupt leaders, the urban anthropology gradually gained a contemporary satirical intent.

Nature morte

I will continue to speak about Jogen's human representation, in the meanwhile an interlude. Immediately after returning from Paris, in a period of meditative solitude in Madras where he took up a job as artist-designer,⁶ Jogen started doing a still-life series titled *Reminiscences of a Dream*. This was during the period of 1968-1973. The still-life is a western genre but he found an indigenous reference in the popular paintings and prints already referred to. The Kalighat paintings, for example, deal with a repertoire of images from everyday world. There is an abundance of animals: ready-to-eat delicacies like fish and prawns, creatures from animal fables and also, of course, the whole range of companions and carriers (*bahanas*) of the gods. The rodent, reptile, bird, cat, tiger, bull, monkey all share one feature: the animal is stationed as an animate prop not very different from the objects that surround the gods and humans in the ornamental set-up.

The common objects in Jogen's still-lives are organic, palpable, ornamental, and a little dead: nature morte. In the proliferating presence of nature is gleaned both a scent of burgeoning life and smell of dying, recalling surrealist obsession with mortality. This is important because some of this carries over in his figurative paintings and is especially visible in parts of the body like the breasts, genitals, hands and feet that sometimes shrink and curl like the extremities of a corpse. This is played out to shocking effect in the set of images, done in the mid-1970s, of Ganesha, the auspicious elephant-headed god who the artist moulds into a swollen mass of animal flesh.

Morphology

It is ingenious of Jogen to have devised a medium that is between drawing and painting—though he was adept, already at the end of his art school years, with bold black-pastel drawings and richly brushed of paintings.

Avoiding the ubiquitous use of transparent water-colour in the recent Bengal tradition, and not satisfied with only the graphic aspect of the image he started, just before going to Paris and decidedly on return, to build up another kind of surface. He still

adopted what one can call a typical, Bengali artist's solution to painting—by not using the (by now equally pervasive) medium of oil on canvas. He worked on paper with pen and ink and the drawing came to be blended with layers of soft dry pastel in muted, usually gray and ochre tones.

From then on, Jogen's incisive contour defines the object or figure that is then masked by a flat black (sometimes white) background against which it is positioned like a puppet against a drop-curtain. The compacted surface is intricately marked: like a wood-block or metal intaglio print; like fine textured fabric or an embroidery webbed with minute decoration.⁷ Jogen crafts his image so as to reveal the manner in which the two mediums, ink pigment, jelly. Because the graphic image is delicately veined with rippling lines, swirls and eddies of smudged ink; because it is also brittle with criss-cross cracks; and because this meshes in turn with the fuzzy sheen of pastel, the image has unique surface: a tinted, flesh-like veneer that is undulating, scaly, oozing, vulnerable. For the very reason perhaps he presses it down, glazing it with a coat of enamel and further flattening it under the framed glass.

If this is a way of preserving it, Jogen's obsession with the human body also makes him dismantle it. The elaborate surface is truly a kind of fabrication and he props up the image or lets it collapse into soft folds, surface wrinkles, crumpled limbs. The virtuoso contour is turned inside out by the fleshy immanence of the living body, and by what is sometimes a freakish outgrowth of limbs. The effect is rather like if you turned a body—garment inside out and found the ghost, a stripped and abused dummy underneath. Here is a form of sensuality that opens out in a kind of abjection—as if the worm had entered the core of the body and nibbled outward, distorting the shape, staining the surface.

Dream/Nightmare/Love

Jogen first reveals a dream of plentitude with a twice mediated imagery—of remembering, of dreaming—in the series called reminiscences of a dream referred to above. The dream of plentitude, common to all artists and constitutive of the great imaginary, is centred around the mother. The pressed up feeling in Jogen's imagery plays upon an infant's experience.⁸ It includes the churned-up fear in that proximate condition: the fear of an expulsion from the womb, of the slow and symbolic withdrawal of the mother's breast, of loss/aggression/guilt, with signs from the libido overlapping with the fantasy of the infant slipping back into the womb. Jogen makes no bones about the way his imagery swims in and out of a translucent darkness as a literal offering from the unconscious.

One of the drawings of this period (*Reminiscences of a dream* 5, 1969), features two exquisitely drawn fish and a snake floating in an aquarium-view of ancient water-bourn life: it functions as an economical sign for the coming into existence of the creature world. In another drawing (*Reminiscences of a dream* 44, 1973), a woman with the shadow of a lotus eclipsing her face reveals her breast. A series of related images suggest a replete mother, as well as the horror of a devouring mother. The fear is associated with the infant's need and then, at a later stage, with a boy's sexuality. The darkness is often populated by a range of metamorphosed phallic forms that are eerie, graceful, comic by turn.

The same dream of plentitude with its icon, the mother's breast, is later distorted into a caricatural flabbiness. Here Jogen's treatment of flesh suggests the disintegration of the whole and good object; it provides castigation of the grotesque that dwells in the infant's universe; it transposes male aggression into a form of nemesis: into male bodies, with their rotund and obese form mimicking, mocking more benign aspects of sensuous flesh.

When the female torso makes a frontal appearance in his seminal painting, *Nati-Binodini* (1975), it is as if a healing allegory unfolds. Binodini dasi is a well-known courtesan of nineteenth century Bengal: her ascendancy in the public gaze is related to her becoming a famous stage actress and transcending her 'plight' by her superior acting powers and, further, by writing her autobiography. She is a performative presence (it is interesting that Jogen decides to paint her fictional 'portrait' after seeing a performance of a play based on her life). She shows her large breasts through her blouse and sari and offers a testimony of pain. And it is as if Jogen recognizes this as a testimony of male adulthood— the ability to confront the object of infantile greed, of male desire and occasional abuse. Binodini's exposure does not finally invite either greed or violence even as she, with her questioning glance and set jaw, shows no embarrassment at the retracted breasts that are like withered moons floating on her chest, shielding her heart.

The female figure in Jogen's oeuvre is almost always sympathetically portrayed. He can be seen to take a clearly progressive line advocated by reformists in the Bengal 'renaissance' through the nineteenth century and continued in the radical politics of the more recent decades. The fact that the woman is usually the protagonist, differentiates Jogen from the popular conventions of satire that often target the woman. It places him closer to the high culture of Bengal — the novel and the cinema— where the woman tends to be valorized, redeemed, martyred: the man falls short.

Male Figure

If in Jogen's imagery the brunt of the more controversial aspects of this (popular and elite) history of representation is borne by the middle class male figure, biographical questions multiply. Is this a continuation of the critique mounted by the colonialists with their own version of manliness; is this an internal critique of the babu,⁹ whose weakness is lampooned in pictures and literature of Bengal; does Jogen (un-) consciously encapsulate these two versions of a colonial history of urban India, including the more contentious aspects of sexual degeneracy? Developed as part of his repertoire when he came to Delhi in 1973, he superimposes on the middle class male figure another layer of corruption worn by the contemporary civil servant and businessman backed by state power. Just before he left Paris, he had made a strong (Rouault-like) expressionist oil painting titled *Representative from Hell* (1965). This corpulent old man, expressing the artist's disdain for the social exploiter, features in later works (as *Man on Sofa*, 1976). Is then the male figure entirely outside himself, a mere object of satire?

Fortunately, the subjective, is not lost in Jogen's satire. So if the male is a foppish dandy, violent husband, bogus priest/preacher or, as of today, a corrupt intellectual, leader, bureaucrat, moneybag,— this is not the end of the story.

The intriguing twist to the male characterization comes when male frailty becomes a chosen form of effeminacy, even a form of androgyny. Then we will glean that many male figures (like the classical *Man Sitting*, 1981) are not without tenderness. Jogen gives some of his male figures soft bodies, small flabby breast embellished by an odd variety of nipples; he gives them a stooping stem-like spine, delicate features and far away eyes—like the self-same Apu with whom we began. The eyes of a man awash in a bewildering world and subject always to some form of real and parodic desire. His very fragility appears to make him transparent and so, even at times liminal.

Couples/Performance

Jogen has a tantalized, even ambivalent attitude towards conjugality, domesticity. Bedsheets, pillows, moons, lotuses—all metonymically conjured elements of romantic love—feature from the time of his marriage in 1970. As part of the *Dream series*, these images hover behind screens, straining the viewer with recall in a typically surrealist mode where physical obstruction and psychic release are simultaneously proposed.

When the couples actually begin to appear in the later paintings—and this motif continues till today—there is a double allegory at work: the gender histories of the male and female are entangled not only at an intersubjective level in the present, they are laden with the history of male and female representations in Bengal since the nineteenth century. This is history where the middle class couple is the target of scorn among the colonialists who see them ‘aping’ the white man to comic effect; when they invite curiosity, envy, mockery, from the ‘plebian artists’ (erstwhile artisans); and when they become the subject of sophisticated scrutiny by the elite artist — like the caricatures by Gangenendranath Tagore in the second decade of this century.

Although Jogen’s couple figures can be referred back in time (up to mid-nineteenth century), their presence is performative: they refer to the past, but the flesh has been caressed in the present, the encounter is taking place now. And although the figures are mainly middle class, some of them are pushed to the edge and can be seen to be located outside the pale, in a state of wild eccentricity. There is streak of voyeurism in Jogen’s work regarding his own social class and its sexuality. Relationships are observed and critiqued sympathetically, as in the work of his contemporary, Bhupen Khakhar. The difference is that Khakhar is usually present (often in disguise) in the *mise-en-scene* of his paintings, and thus monitors the voyeurism with his own narcissistic gaze; Jogen usually positions himself outside and is the more socially curious as he is also more critical. What is similar is that both Khakhar and he are at times stubbornly complicit in the state of derangement exhibited by their characters.

What I call madness can be recognized in the facial features but almost more so in what appears to be a suggestive, insinuating gesture. Jogen’s delineation of the winding octopus limbs with fingers and toes like crawling insects have always appeared disturbing. They now seem to be more overtly stricken and make a signal of panic.

In recent works, especially in the set of large oil paintings done in 1994-1996, both men and women, now equally avaricious and savage, are not ‘well painted’ in that they are both misshapen and crude. Precisely for that reason they are among the most audacious works he has done¹⁰. Posed against a bright-coloured backdrop, the figures are play-acting for the camera in a primitive studio; they beckon the viewer from the shallow space of popular theatre.¹¹

Always especially fond of the popular form of the *jatra*, Jogen’s ‘theatricals’ feature current enactments of past performances — a deliberate anachronism.

In the large oil painting, *The Blue Sari* (1995), there is some kind of a mythological

camouflage shielding the bemused eroticism of the scene where she turns her head and covers her eye while the tiger assaults the man. Who are the protagonists of this high drama? The tiger, associated in mythology with the goddess, is here sexually charged; is he attacking a demon, a lover, is he a rival in the suit of a tiger? Or is this mere play in the guise of a mythological, a tableau in the popular mode where you make bold to present a scene of unsublimated lust in a genre that combines bathos and comedy? Replete with innuendoes of the *vernacular*, the sense of cultural belonging is now shot through with this mocking encounter between coupled protagonists.

Signature

Jogen is a superb draughtsman from the start. The line, while it alludes in its every twist and turn to art-historical trajectories, Indian and western, depends also on a consistent quirk that Jogen calls his originality and that we may call the morphology of Jogen's imagery. His distinction lies in that he uses and destroys the virtuosity — making the line serve for tortuous goings on inside as it does for social caricature and ornamental exuberance.

Note the line of the spine which he draws in a wavy sweep from the nape of the neck to the parting of the buttocks. The spine is like a draw-string that folds and unfurls the figure. It is both graceful and dysfunctional, it provides no armature for the body, there is no firm skeletal underpinning to the flaccid flesh. A literal translation of the word spinless, here is also a suggestion that there may be a peculiar wiring trick, an energy-flow that allows the body to live and grow as a plant on its sapfilled stem, waving in the breeze, resilient in a storm.

His recent work is a flattened version of itself, a gray, monochromatic performance by marionettes. In his present works the drawing tends to devolve into naive simplicity; indeed, someone seeing his work today might think him a kind of 'modern primitive', which makes one wonder whether that was indeed the morphology that he set out to evolve. This is a moot question : it is interesting however to pick out the vocabulary of evolution / devolution because this is the nature of his motifs as well : a coming into being out of a lump of earth/flesh with an organic purpose, the deflation of that purpose through an inner doubt, a morbidity, that queers the pitch of even his socially motivated representations.

His occasional return to an affirmative gestalt and, as in some of the pictures in this exhibition, to the lyric should always be kept in mind. In a series of black brush drawings, done so recently as the early 1990s, the rhythmic calligraphy suggests not

only the play of his temperament but reconfirms that the simplicity of line is also an eminently modernist preference and he belongs, despite all his protestations about the indigenous, to the shared language of modern artists.

This contemporaneity is to do with Jogen's inalienable position as an artist of his time. He insists that we look at the picture through his eyes, that we recognize his hand. This is a modernist position : the (self) valorization of an artist's unique signature. It is an obstinacy : that the styled contour should never waver, *even though* it may undo itself, ontologically, as Jogen's new work seems to do.

In this new work, it is as if after the corporeal enactment is done, something that is elusive, some receding presence that is not quite a person but only its shadow is making its appearance ... and we will find Jogen saying anxiously, determinedly, that he is yet to discover the real ghost for his future image.

Notes and References

Recommended references on Jogen Chowdhury include : *Jogen Chowdhury, Drawings*, 1959-1994, Exhibition Catalogue, Seagull, Calcutta, 1994. (Includes Jogen Chowdhury's writings translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay); Geeti Sen, *Image and Imagination : Five Contemporary Artists in India*, Mapin, Ahmedabad, 1996. Includes a chapter on the artist; and *Jogen : Oils and Drawings* 1969-96, Exhibition Catalogue, CIMA, Calcutta, 1996. (Includes a long interview with the artist by R. Siva Kumar).

1. Apu is the hero of Satyajit Ray's Apu Trilogy comprising *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956), *Apur Sansar* (1959). The Trilogy was based on Bibhutibhusan Bandhopadhyaya's novel *Pather Panchali* (1929), and its sequel, *Aparajito* (1931) written in the manner of a *Bildungsroman*, chronicling Apu's life from birth to youth to romance and fatherhood in the form of a journey.

2. August 1947 : the year of India's Independence from British colonial rule and, in the same moment, the Partition of the sub-continent, whereby India and west and east Pakistan (now Bangladesh), come into existence at the cost of mass murder and an unprecedented migration of populations across the new borders.

3. Diary entry of 23.5. 1993. See 'Thoughts about everything — and self-consciousness : Entries from a *Jogen Chowdhury diary* with the first entry made in Madras, 11 April 1969, and continuing till 21 November 1993,' *Jogen Chowdhury, Drawings*, 1959-1994, Exhibition Catalogue, Seagull, Calcutta, 1994, p.17.

4. Jogen Chowdhury in 'Images of Experience : An interview with Jogen Chowdhury' by R. Siva Kumar, *Jogen : Oil and Drawings* 1969-96, Exhibition Cata-

logue, CIMA, Calcutta, 1996, p.23.

5. The nineteenth century tradition of the Kalighat *patas* (water-colour paintings on paper) sold around the Kali temple in Calcutta as penny-sheet pictures of icons and popular stories, is an important art-historical resource. This cannot be elaborated here. As selected readings see Mildred Archer, *Indian Popular Painting in the India Office Library*, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, London, 1977; Jyotindra Jain, *Kalighat Paintings : Images from a Changing World*, Mapin, Ahmedabad, 1999.

6. Jogen worked as an artist-designer in the State-run Weavers' Service Centre between 1968-73, and the environment of looms, textiles, dyeing, block-printing would have influenced his work at the time.

7. The art of embroidery practiced by Jogen's mother, fits into the larger tradition of the *kantha* — embroidered cotton quilts with figural motifs stitched in an all-over pattern.

8. R. Siva Kumar makes a succinct point about how there is an infantile aspect in Jogen's figural work where 'the body is always experienced from the blinding proximity of a child pressed against its mother, or the lover exploring the body of his partner.' See '*Images of Experience : an interview with Jogen Chowdhury*' by R. Siva Kumar, *Ibid.*, p.10

9. The term *babu* is both a title of respect for a middle class man and a derogatory term for a half-Anglicized clerk coming down from the colonial period. It refers to a condition of being in the city, caught midway between the working class and the elite; the *babu* is a figure that invites both envy and scorn.

10. The reference is to paintings like *Couple in Blue*, 1994, *Midsummer Night*, 1994, *Reclining figure*, 1995, *Couple I*, 1995, *Situation* 1995, *Spring* 1995.

11. Jogen's father was an amateur artist, he sometimes painted backdrops to the village theatre. Jogen remembers in particular the image of Krishna dancing on the serpent Kaliya in an expanse of blue.

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