
Paritosh Sen on Jogen Chowdhury

There are points of convergence between Bikash's world and that of Jogen Chowdhury. Chowdhury's images spring from a keen social awareness which came naturally to him. He was an impressionable boy of six or seven when his family, along with thousands of others, was uprooted from its hereditary home in East Bengal to face an uncertain and insecure world of unwanted refugees on the periphery of the vast metropolis of Calcutta. Of course, I am referring to the most absurd political event of the century—the partition of Punjab and Bengal on the basis of the notorious "Two Nation-theory". That Jogen, on his growing up, would look at those who were responsible for the gigantic bungling with deep suspicion and anger was only too natural. In a recent interview Jogen is quoted as saying "..... basically, it was the experience of being in Calcutta that shaped the content and style of my painting..... Since life is always subject to change, therefore, various events and their perceptions contribute to their development ... All changes in life, however indirectly, somehow get recorded in the artist's subjective experience of joy and sorrow or in a social context. All this is dependent upon the extent of the artist's involvement with a particular situation." On another occasion he is reported to have said, "because of social disbalances and haphazard development, the whole society has grown distorted". People who are responsible for this distortion—the politician, the black marketeer, the bureaucrat, the priest, the family patriarch and all kinds of exploiters and social parasites—are subjected to Jogen's biting satires. This can be interpreted as a form of indirect protest. That such expressions, fused with high aesthetic values, can become powerful visual statements are borne out by numerous examples in the history of art—Goya, Daumier, Grosz, Beckman, Orozco, Sequiros, not to talk of Picasso himself. Since human experience is basically a sum total of both the tragic and the comic, wit, humour and fantasy are also valid human expressions. Jogen's not excepted. His "Lady waiting for her beloved" and "Tiger in the moonlit night" are only two examples out of many. Like those of Bikash, most of these ideas manifest themselves in the form of "potraits". But the comparison ends here. The protagonists in Bikash's paintings are generally placed against a "Setting" that appears natural to them and are complete with chiarascuro and an illusion of depth, whereas those of Jogen's are placed dead flat against an equally flat, dark (generally speaking) background, thus sharply delineating their contours. The forms are freely drawn, bearing in mind the characterisation the artist is after. Sometimes they are so exaggerated

and so free-flowing that they look like human atlases ("Man-VII" and others).

This writer has on occasion been struck by a close resemblance (in characterisation) between some Rabindranath Tagore's heads and those of Jogen's ("Victorious man", "Face of little man", "The Bureaucrat", etc). In both cases the love for the use of black ink and a penchant for texture is quite strong except that Tagore's textural effect is accidental whereas Jogen's is deliberate. This parallel should not be stretched any further. I am aware that some of my readers will differ with what I have just said but, surely, this could bear some examination. The very fact of Jogen's forms being freely drawn, necessarily implies a departure from realism and they are, therefore, sometimes subject to violent distortion. This, however, adds to the intensity of the expression. The forms are curvilinear rather than a combination of both curves and straightlines. In fact, the latter is hardly present in the overall structure within the picture frame. The contour is undulating. The limbs are so flexible as to assume all kinds of impossible stances. The fingers are pointed and curled up in the fashion of birds' claws—altogether an unified whole that creates its own anatomical principles and justifies them. The use of colours is both severely restrained and restricted, possibly to allow the image to become all-important. And as said earlier, this is further achieved when the image is strongly contrasted against a plain dark background. It is perhaps for this reason that Jogen is one of those few artists whose works we can enjoy when reproduced in black and white and in whose works the border line between a drawing and a painting is reduced to its minimum. All this gives his works a distinct stamp of individuality which has made him justly famous. It also fulfils to a large extent his own motto, "I will not paint like others".

Reprinted from

'Visions' catalogue, 1986
