Meeting Jogen Chowdhury

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My first encounter with contemporary Indian art came in March 1978. Trained primarily as a Sanskritist and art historian, I had up until that moment made it a principle to avoid anything closer to me in time than the 12th century. In march of 1978 Gulam Mohammed Sheikh published an article " New Contemporeries" in Marg, in which he discussed the work of several new artists. The article was a revelation to me and I began to correspond with the author and a few of the artists, including Nalini Malini, Meera Mukherjee and Jogen Chowdhury. My correspondence with Jogen was to last through many years, in which he served as my guide first to the vigorous and complex world of contemporary Bengali literature. I visited Jogen in 1979 in New Delhi and spent some time in his studio, returning much the richer with several of his paintings, among them a Ganesa, "Ma Laksmi", " Portrait of a Middle Class Teacher", " A Punjabi Beauty", "The Fruit II", "Still Life With a Basket of Fruit", and "In my Dream III".

All of the paintings were done in 1970's after Jogen returned from Paris. Jogen has often spoken about himself and the formative infuences on his work. One of the first things he sent me was an essay that he wrote in 1970, in which he described what he thought were the problems that faced the painters of his generation. For many of his contemporeries the prime issue centered around an explicit choice between following a traditional artistic idiom and preserving something called "Indianness", or breaking out of that mould and seeking to work wholly within the language of European modernism. To Jogen it seemed obvious that society had changed too radically for the old artistic language to be adequate to the task of representing its problems, while the imported language lacked the organic roots required of any language for it to communicate its meaning. But more importantly, Jogen saw the very question of choice between a traditional Indian or European modernism as essentially misplaced. For him the central issue could not be a choice between any ready-made and available formal languages, whatever they might be. In this early essay he articulated the critical need for an artist to create for himself his own language, a language that reflected the concerns of that artist as an individual, as a member of his own society, as an active participant in the problems of his own time and place, with his own personal history, his own desires and longings. Jogen commented about his contemporaries and the way in which they conceptualized the problems that they faced in these words, "The tragedy is that most of these painters are ignoring themselves, their

present environments and contradictions of their day to day life and society.... The artist-individuals is in the centre point of everything: East, West (all the developements of Western art), past-present , tradition,personal experiences, contradictions, dreams, thoughts, beliefs, imaginations, etc are surrounding him. He will have to discover himself genuinely in the midst of all these... This experience of self-realization will make him able to take the correct path to create a work of art which will be his own".

What drew me to Jogen 's work was precisely its power to make traditional images or ordinary objects into haunting icons of the conflicts and moral ambiguities of contemporary society and the individual. I was probably first captivated by the series of Drawings of Ganesa, done in the 1970's. Ganesa was a familar figure to me from the Puranic myths and the temple sculptures. But Jogen's Ganesas had a different appeal from the gentle, humorous classical sculptures. His Ganesas are disturbing images. Where the traditional sculptor could use fluid lines and gently curving surfaces to achieve an image of quiet grace and beauty despite the incongruity of human body and elephant head, Jogen seemed to aim for the opposite effect. There are no smooth lines to lead the eye around his Ganesas; there are no smooth transitions from different areas of the body. Instead there are discreet units which seem intentionally ill-related to each other. In my painting a pair of incongruously small legs forms one unit. Above them is a torso divided clearly into two sections. A seperate breast sits uncomfortably on the torso. Finally, grafted onto all of this is the elephant head. The figure as a whole lacks any obvious symmetry and the eye gets no assistance in moving from one area to the next, but tends to disperse its attention equally among these competing areas of interest. Further contributing to the sense of disquietude is the lack of depth in space. The figure is strangely suspended in an inky sea of black. The elaborate cross-hatching all over the body might otherwise have served to give the figure a reality in three-dimensional space, an illusion of volume, but any such illusion is rapidly dispelled by the insistent denial of space in the monotonic ground. The sculptural quality of the form thus becomes itself one factor in a series of visual tensions, this time between solid object and flat background. The cross-hatching on the figure in its asymmetries further discourages the eye in its search for regularity. From start to finish, the eye seeks in vain for balance, symmetry and unity of pattern and instead, finding imbalance, asymmetry and multiplicity of competing directions and accents, it registers a sense of disturbance and anxiety. The God of auspicious beginnings is here an image of conflicts, mirroring perhaps the ambiguity of the human endeavors he is petitioned to oversee.

It was not only Ganesa whom Jogen had transformed through his unique visual language. Jogen's Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, in her plain sari with her fat stubby hands, seemed to me to be proof of the ancient maxim that the form a god takes corresponds to the thoughts of the devotees. If the ancient goddess was ideally beautiful , adorned with precious jewels, Jogen's goddess is decidedly common. The goddess has become her devotee, the physical projection of the devotee's vulgar wants and cravings. She sits atop a lotus that is disproportionately large as if to emphasize her spreading girth. The radiant rose color of the lotus draws attention to the drabness of the goddess herself . Jogen's use of color in these early drawings is sparing and effective. The crown of the goddess wears, so out of place on a woman so plain, seems to mock all conceptions of a presiding deity of generosity, and her features, set in a stony stare, do not exactly invite a worshipper's petitions. In Lakshmi Jogen has again used carefully staged incongruities to create a disquieting image that demands of us that we ask ourselves to what use we put the wealth that Lakshmi might give us.

I also found the series of portraits to which "Portrait of a Middle Class Teacher" belongs strangely compelling. The portraits have much in common with the Ganesas and Ma Lakshmi. They too float in an area of undefined darkness that serves to deny any illusion of volume and three dimensional reality that might have otherwise been created by the careful shading and cross-hatching. They too are surprising and disturbing presences. The heads are remarkebly individualistic and one senses sometimes the personality of a real sitter for these curious portraits. Nonetheless there are counterbalancing tensions in these paintings that preclude any hasty reading of them as ordinary physical likenesses. Despite or perhaps on account of our long familiarity with the conventions of the portraits bust, there are too many distortions of reality here to permit us to be content with such a simple reading. In "Portrait of a Middle Class Teacher", for example, the head is balanced like the head of a puppet on a stick-like neck to which it has no organic relation. The lifeless staring eyes give the whole a terrifyingly intense air of unreality. What seems to be laid bare in such abject simplicity is not so much a physical person as an inner reality and it is an inner reality ,that is not comforting or pleasing. The middle-class teacher seems to epitomize the numbing exhaustion of a bad job badly done. The glowing blue-green tints in the face give it a corpse-like appearance ,hinting at the truly deadening reality of the teacher's existence. When I returned from my visit to Jogen in Delhi I began to study Bengali. Eventually I translated a group of short stories by Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay. I came to see in Jogen's portraits an equally effective but different language, capable of

communicating what it meant to suffer from spiritual as well as material poverty.

I brought home few of Jogen's women, though I admired his painting of Nati Binodini and eventually came to read her biography. I seem at that stage of my life to have preferred the unsettling portraits and Ganeśas and the uncanny still-lifes. I lost touch with Jogen during the late 80's and 90's, though I still occassionally listened to the tapes he had made for me of Jibanananda Das' poems. I even tried my hand at translating some of the poems,still wisely stashed safety in a drawer or long since dicarded, I am not sure which. I lost touch too with Bengali literature; the stacks of Desh lying unread eventually overwhelmed my office and I stopped my subscription. Now I look forward to renewing all of these things, my correspondence with Jogen, my acquaintance with his works, and through his guidance my experience of Bengali literature. Jogen has already sent me Pratibha Bose's Mahabarater Maharanye. I can see that I have a lot to catch up on by November, when I plan to be in New York for his show at the Bose Pacia Modern Art Gallery!