

REQUIEM TO SURESH NEOTIA:

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(English Version)

We knew, and so did he, that Death was getting impatient as Suresh Neotia fought doggedly for over two years, battling the emperor of all maladies. He had taken the last grim battle of his life with his usual combination of equanimity, grit and strategy. He knew why I was desperately trying to fast-track a slow behemoth like DD for some interviews with him, as one who helped rebuild India’s cultural traditions.

We had a few unwritten pacts ever since I met him first in 1983 and one of them was never to waste time in discussing the obvious or in gossip. I had just been evicted from the mainstream of the IAS to a handicrafts store in the seventh year of service and it was then that the development commissioner from Delhi introduced me to Suresh Neotia. As I went over his fascinating collection of wood carvings, stone sculptures, metal figures and paintings in the sylvan ambience of his Queen’s Park residence, I realised that he was not just one more Marwari entrepreneur. Our decades of involvement in the arts proved so useful when I headed the country’s ministry of culture in 2008: when it was really crying for some strong pep pills.

The Poddar-Neotia clan had, migrated from Rajpootana a century and a quarter ago and the maternal grandfather had set up one of the first wholly-Indian trading firms. Later they set up RK-BK, a leading agent in fertilisers, petro-products and cement. When Suresh Neotia set up the Gujarat Ambuja Cement, I recall how he had to battle against the odds of the ‘permit-control raj’. But he never knew how to throw up his hands in disgust, for he had learnt how to navigate the ‘Soviet Indian’ labyrinths.

He continued his passion for the arts and in between negotiations with babus in Himachal Pradesh, he would steal time to check out some unusual Pahari paintings and exquisite carvings. I would get updates during his unannounced visits to my small chamber in Udyog Bhavan in Delhi. His frequent get-togethers in Delhi and Kolkata gathered the IAS, IPS and a lot of others and when we tried to understand why he collected bureaucrats and not stamps, a rather laconic senior once muttered: “He likes collecting rubber stamps!”

The music baithaks in his house were sought after events, much before ‘Page Three’ celebrities grinned silly before cameras. The annual Gulab Bari festival that he organised after Holi brought dozens of classical singers and dancers together but as its fame spread, so did crowds. Everyone would, then make a bee-line for the outstanding culinary spreads and I loved to see proud non vegetarians in Kolkata lap up pure vegetarian Rajasthani delights.

Suresh Neotia headed the Anamika Kala Sangam, which supported many a new artiste and theatre personality and his personal rapport with Shyamanand and Chetna Jalan as well as numerous other thespians and singers was source of strength. In the 1990s, he set up Jnana Pravaha, a cultural institution and museum in Benaras, with the active involvement of his widowed elder sister-in-law, Bimla Poddar. The talks, researches and publications that Jnana Pravaha did in such a short time were more stimulating and often far better than what its older counterparts could do.

He set up the Somnath Temple Trust in Gujarat, and in Benaras, he opened a rather unusual school for teaching young priests the correct pronunciation, recitation and rhythm of Sanskrit mantras. Neotia proved that one could very well be rational and revel in India’s great plurality and yet not run down his religion to suit ‘pink’ fashions. His rapport and respect for Muslim ustads and scholars was genuine and he did not need to flaunt his secular beliefs.

Suresh Neotia did not mince words as we often argued on the Boards on Victoria Memorial or the National Culture Fund, where he slashed through government's cultural policies. But, had it not been for zealous collectors like him, who had braved the draconian Antiquities Act of 1972 and the arrogance of petty officialdom, India would have little left to collect now, as smuggling and mediocre maintenance took deadly toll. God bless Heaven, for it has now to handle this restless soul with colossal energy and a sharp aesthetic eye!