

## THE JOGEN CHOWDHURY I KNOW

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I can't remember when and where I met Jogen Chowdhury. I think I inherited him from the treasury of talent that God has bestowed on us. I have seen his typically fluid line drawings of humans outlined in free flowing shapes, that looked innocent but could convey the harshest of reality. But what endears him to was always his extremely genial personality and his easy gentle manner. He had a charm that could disarm even Nadir Shah or his modern version, may be another bearded Shah. I remember introducing myself almost apologetically to Jogen da many years ago, as Hemen Mazumdar's grand-nephew. I had never painted or managed to wield anything more creative than a babu's pen. But to him it did not matter. He started telling me most enthusiastically and tried to explain how great a painter he was.

Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee had once asked me why no one in Kolkata ever called me 'apni', which was quite different from what he saw when other bureaucrats spoke to eminent persons in his presence. I explained that this was because I had grown up as a struggling common person in Kolkata, who had to hang like a bat on the foot boards of overcrowded buses. Every one senior to me always referred to by name and as 'tumi' and we never kept any distance, just because I was in administration. Persons like Basanta Chaudhury, Rudraprasad Sengupta, Rakhi Sarkar or Aparna Sen would always call me 'bacchaa chhele', because however old I became, they were always years ahead. But, Jogen da would never call me by name, I don't know why. He did not call me 'apni' but referred to me as Jawhar babu or Mistaar Shorkar. Better still was his 'ei-jey', which is so typical of Jogen da.

He was successful long before I could start writing properly. But I am grateful that even 15-20 years ago, he was acknowledged and encouraged. His simple "Bhaloi lekha" meant a lot then. I remember that in 2002, we got together when

Kolkata was deliberately bypassed by NGMA for Picasso's exhibition. The ostensible reason was that we did not have an "appropriate" modern public art exhibition facility. It made no sense to Delhi's art babus, many of who worked with me later when I became Culture Secretary, that Kolkata drew record numbers of viewers in 1983 when the exhibition of the plaster casts of Rodin's sculptures was displayed. This is when Rakhi di got a group together and met the Chief Minister and I became involved. For some reason, government felt that even though I was Industry Secretary, I may understand art a bit better. This led to the setting up of a Trust for establishing the Kolkata Museum of Modern Art.

We met regularly and I came to understand more of Jogen da.

This is where I saw the soft side of his personality. He told me of his years in Delhi in the President's office, which has more trees than all of Santiniketan. Perhaps this stint made him so well known in Delhi, where I also spent some 17 years of my life. But none of the rudeness and brash, pushy attitude of Delhi seem to have affected him. He remained peaceful and apparently easy going. I say "apparently" because behind his soft exterior and temperament, he was essentially a hard working and dedicated artist. After all, he was a Bangal from Faridpur. He had seen real struggle as a refugee and had gone through a lot of pain that his contorted figures revealed in art.

In 2006, left for Delhi as I had enough of the Chief Minister and his favourite bureaucrats who were dampening my enthusiasm. It was very risky as all those I had known in the national capita 14 years ago when I came back to Kolkata had all retired or left. In those early and tough days in Delhi, I was shunted around and bullied by all. Many friends and colleagues gave me up as a "lost case". Most IAS, IPS would avoid me as they knew that the CM did not like me. But Jatin da maintained his friendship. He would call me up when ever he was there and invite me over. We met on a few occasions and chatted on K MoMA, art, Santiniketan, Kolkata and a lot of

common subjects of interest. He never gossiped and whenever I used my typical flowery language, he would laugh but not join in my charged emotions.

By 2008, I was promoted as as India's Culture Secretary and was in fact the only Kolkata Bengali in 60 years to occupy that post. People changed overnight. Jogen da was pleased but his behaviour continued to be the same as always: very pleasant. We discussed projects and he invited me to his home in Santiniketan, where I received the best of hospitality as did all guests. How he managed so many egos is a mystery but he always succeeded. He spoke to me of his Art Centre that was coming up and blocked the dates, 19th to 21st November 2010. I had to be there, no excuses would do. I did have some major problems in reaching Kolkata and Santiniketan from Delhi, but I made it to his event, only because of his warmth and firm command. The Santiniketan Society of Visual Art and Design, SSVAD, was finally inaugurated the 19th amidst celebrations and art festivities.

Prof Dinkar Kowshik and many others had come from long distances and he introduced me to them most endearingly. I sat next to Prof Kowshik and learnt so much from him. We promised to catch up again but that did not happen as he died shortly thereafter, which is sad. I was amazed to see how an artist like Jogen Da had gathered so many fellow artists to build such a multi dimensional centre in Santiniketan that had hardly any art infrastructure other than Visva Bharati. I promised to visit it in peace but in the next 16 months that I continued in that post, I could never do so. PM was the Acharya of the university and he was also my boss as he looked after Culture directly. My rare visits to Visva Bharati were, therefore, just for a day and were packed with meetings. I thought I would retire in March 2012 and enjoy life, which included longer visits to Santiniketan, but God and Government decided otherwise. I was made CEO of Prasar Bharati to look after 500 stations of All India Radio and Doordarshan. I could not visit Santiniketan except once. So, I lost regular touch with many, including Jogen da. Then, he became an MP but even though I do not understand politics, I think our relationship is the same as before.

They say unlike poles attract. I remain excitable and argumentative. Jogen da always remains calm and conciliatory. I have never seen him lose his temper. And more important is that he remains extremely creative.