

jawhar sircar, secretary, culture

‘Do not apply value judgements to culture’

J

awhar Sircar, a 1975 batch IAS officer, is an exceptional bureaucrat who enjoys working in the Culture Ministry. No wonder, he has been the longest-serving Secretary in this Ministry. He has tried to cater to the ‘cultural community’ in various ways. He draws satisfaction from the fact that his efforts have brought back the community to the Ministry. No doubt, he has achieved a lot in this field because of his keen interest in the subject. From the mid-1990s till 2005, he took the lead in upgrading the annual Kolkata Film Festival to a remarkable and recognised event of international standards. His other interests are in theatre, in which he became involved from his mid-teens, and in certain genres of music and dance. In this interview, he speaks about the problems of attitude and orientation in the functioning of the Ministry and its associated bodies.

interviewed by Diptendra Raychaudhuri



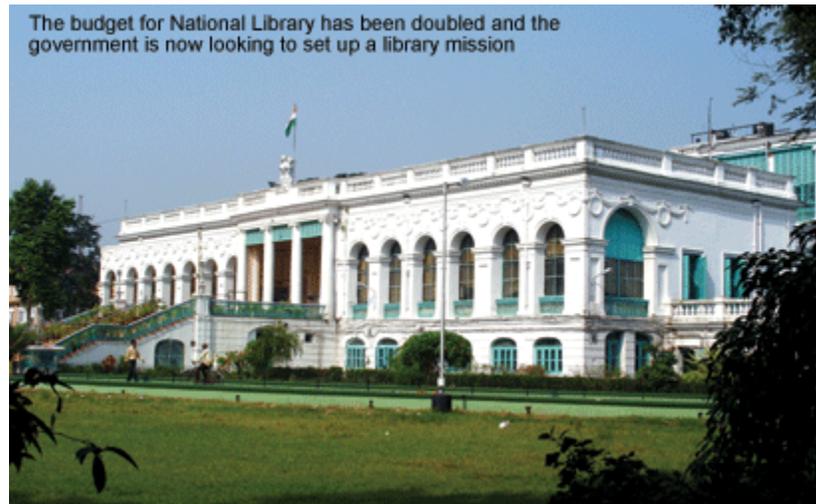
gfiles: Throughout your career, you have mostly served in finance or related departments and ministries. You also served as Chief Election Officer of West Bengal. At the fag end of your career, you became Secretary in the Culture Ministry. How has been your experience here?

JAWHAR SIRCAR: True, I spent around 17 years in industry and finance, but I have also spent eight years in education and culture. These are subjects you have to have an innate love for, or you can't live through it. Besides, all the people you are dealing with, or most of them, are very important. They are highly sensitive, highly creative people who get hurt if you don't treat them properly. When they are having a problem, they will insist that you give them full attention. It is a little difficult situation. You fully understand that somebody great will be coming to you only once. Anyway, put it like this, unless you have an innate love for the subject, you may not like to be involved in it, and that has been the problem with this Ministry. People say that many such officials have served in the Ministry—I don't know. They either did not understand the subject or did not like it or wanted to go away. I have spent the longest tenure for any Cultural Secretary. That's my record and I hope to retire from here. It has happened because of my having the advantage of knowing the subject. I come from a family with a world famous artist. So I smelt canvas and oil as soon as I was born. There were others in the family deeply interested in music. So one has had some understanding of music. Literature has been one of my first loves... literature of all types. Not only English, but other languages too.

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gfiles:How have you been able to translate all this into the functioning of the Ministry?

JS:See, the cultural sector doesn’t ask for large amounts of money; it asks for instant relief. So we introduced a scheme last year called the Cultural Function Grant Scheme and it has worked wonders. In one-and-a-half year, we have catered to more than 800 groups. It started when the Prime Minister was in charge of the Ministry. This scheme covers seminars, symposiums, dance, exhibition, theatre and so on. Nearly 800 groups getting money is itself an indication of how popular it is. It is fast track and less cumbersome, though they still say the procedure should be simpler. But then we are dealing with government money, we can’t be careless. We need to have some restrictions. But this particular scheme has brought the cultural community back to the Ministry.



gfiles:Generally speaking, how does the ministry operate?

JS: The ministry operates through two types of organisations. We have eight direct bodies for which we are directly responsible. They are all the national bodies like the National Museum, National Archive, National Gallery, the national library and the National Gallery of Modern Art. Then we have about 40 plus autonomous organisations, and the three academies—Sahitya Akademi, Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Lalit Kala Akademi. We also have the NSD and bodies like the Victoria Memorial and the Indian Museum in Kolkata and the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training. We have 40 such bodies that are self-governed. They have a board of trustees and governing bodies.

In these autonomous bodies, we normally do not interfere; we leave it to the cultural practitioners to exercise their best judgement. Now suppose somebody approaches the Ministry directly for assistance, and if we refer them to XYZ and they don’t get the money, they will be disappointed. So, that is there. We have been looking at other gaps in cultural administration.

gfiles:What are the schemes through which the Ministry furthers its objectives?

JS: There have been very robust schemes in the Ministry that are mainly directed at these bodies. When you give funds to the Archaeological Survey, you expect it to do its own work. because it is full of professionals... you do not interfere with what the professionals are doing. But then there have been gaps and filling up some of the gaps is what we can do. One way to do was through the small assistance plan called the Cultural Function Planned Scheme. Other one is for almost all important performing arts groups like singers, dancers and especially the theatre fellows. They get an annual grant from us. It's called Salary Grants. Sounds very bad...but they also get grants for making productions. We have been able to double the funding for this in two years and have also opened the gates wider. Earlier it was restricted to only those who had got it in the past. So newer groups had been complaining for the last 10 years. Now, the newer groups have been allowed to come in. Older groups thereafter said that they had been getting assistance for 5-10 artists only and the number should be increased. We agreed to that also. As I said, the gates have been opened up. The Ministry has been able to double it in terms of coverage and in terms of amounts.



gfiles: Is there anything for research?

JS: Yes, 'fellowships' is a very interesting scheme under which you may carry on research on something like, let us say, harmoniums or any aspect on Hindustani classical music or the art of a particular artiste. You have to make a proper report and do documentation on it so that it remains in the public domain. Such fellowship and scholarships have been given by the Culture Ministry and very senior artists write even now that they were fellows or research scholars 40 years ago.

It's a good form of encouragement. This also was stagnating. So this also we have increased by almost double. Then there is one more aspect that needs to be considered – performing arts often have a small elite appeal. In other words, a good cinema doesn't get a crowd like, let us say, a commercial cinema. So, sometimes, good thought-provoking themes don't get that audience. So, for small theatres we have a new scheme called 'Studio Theatre Scheme'. Basically it means, if you are having a *baithak* and you want to be in front of just 100 and 150 people who'll understand, you need that much space. The Studio Theatre Scheme is meant to cater to that. So, one has to understand the nuances of culture. It is far different from that of any other world.

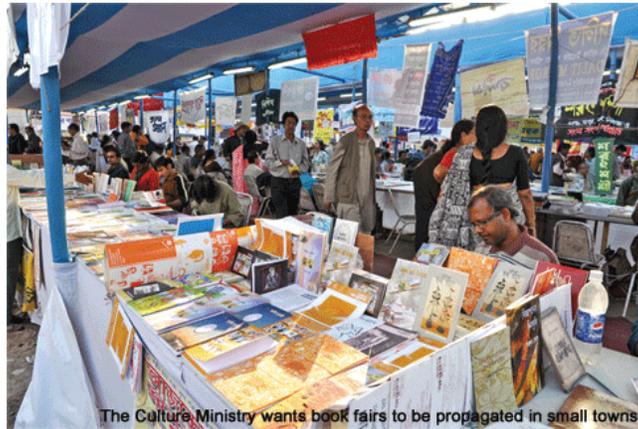


Today museum modernisation is a top priority as most of them have fallen behind in time

gfiles: Experts feel that Indian museums are in a bad shape. What do you feel?

JS: On museums... most of them have fallen behind in time in terms of display, narration and even in terms of basic amenities like lighting, communication, sign boards. Now museum personnel have a standard excuse like this is to be done by PWD or CPWD. So, we have had these co-ordination meetings and I've explained to them that museum modernisation is our top priority. What you have lost, where you have fallen behind in 20-30 years, you'll require 5-10 years to pick up. People are impatient, people have often taken us to task and rightly so... why your museums are in such a shabby or old state. My humble submission is that if we have not been able to catch up in 20-30 years, give us five years. I'll give you an example. In the last two years we have had several foreign exhibitions of both art and antiquities in India. The China exhibition was of antiquities; the Canadians came, and in art we've had Anish Kapoor, we have had the Company schools of paintings. We have had very exciting exhibitions organised at our premises all over India, i.e., in Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi, Hyderabad and Bengaluru. These are joint exercises, it's like joint military exercises when you have foreign groups doing it in front of you.

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gfiles: Is training of museum personnel is also an integral part of this?

JS: We were sending people regularly for training within the country. Now we have started sending them abroad. Just recently, a two-week course organised by the British Museum came to an end. This sort of an intense hand-holding has never been done before. This is a second generation, third generation of museum people we are aiming at, because if the second and middle generation is trained then they will take over the museums in future and they will come with a different mindset. Some of our senior museum personnel have rather fixed ideas. There's no harm in saying this as you know they are very conservative. They feel whatever they learnt 30-40 years ago is what should be practised. So, the best way of going around the problem is to have people who have seen the best in the world and are waiting for a chance.

Now if you can train in a period of 2-3 years a 100 second-level museum persons, it doesn't matter which museum they work for, wherever they work, they are carrying their knowledge with them. So, that is our way of looking at it. Another 5-7 years later you'll have the museums of India changed from within and they don't have to be told what is to be done.

gfiles: There are a number of minor museums in India. Is something being done about them? And, what about art galleries?

JS: For local regional museums, we have started the Museum Modernisation Scheme. Right now, there are 130 museums under this scheme.

Then you come to the National Gallery of Modern Art. It has changed drastically in the last three years or so after Madam Gandhi opened the new premises at NGMA. Then we opened up NGMA Bangalore; NGMA Mumbai we've tried to improve. We've not succeeded very much. Lalit Kala too has got a world class gallery and is having back-to-back exhibitions.

“Cultural expression is something that comes out of its own. Culture can never be guided; culture has to be allowed to flourish. Culture is not to be told what are its targets and what are its achievements. It should be allowed to reach its own level, and the lesser impediments we have is the better. Judgements and value judgements like, ‘this is better than that’ is something not applicable to culture.”

gfiles: In this age of liberalisation and commercialisation, our finer arts or instruments like the *sitar* and similar things are losing out. Now we can listen to *sitar* recitals only on Doordarshan. Though we have so many channels, only one channel gets us to these things.

So, this is a crisis of sorts for all our arts which are not very commercially viable or successful. What is the Culture Ministry doing to promote them?

JS: One is an Annual Grant Scheme. Almost all the classical singers and dancers are able to continue with their tradition of *guru-shishya parampara* mainly because of this scheme. Had the scheme not been there, many of the students would have left, because everybody has to earn a living. To briefly discuss your point about TV channels, there have often been requests to set up a dedicated TV channel for classical music and song. The moment you raise this, there are demands from other cultural sectors that why don't you start for theatre also and so on. The solution perhaps lies in having a completely dedicated cultural channel. But, then comes the question of DD Bharti. It was meant to be a cultural channel, so may be the solution lies in first trying out whether we can work with DD Bharti. You see, the other channels will also have to do it. You cannot have reality shows all the time and expect the children to be going back to classical music. There must be some who'll spend time and energy to explain that this is also an integral part of culture.

gfiles: But, there are local arts like Kalighat *pats* of Bangal or the *pats* and songs of the Bhopas of Rajasthan and so on. These things are dying. So, do you have any means of reviving them?

JS: Seven zonal cultural centres were set up 25 years ago and they have huge amounts of recordings on the older folk arts and music in every manner but you need a clientele that understands folk songs. If the clientele is not there, you cannot force it to prosper. What we try to do is to take these things and distribute them in different parts of the world. But, cultural expression is something that comes on its own. Culture can never be guided; culture has to be allowed to flourish. Culture is not to be told what are its targets and what are its achievements, it must be allowed to reach its own level, and the lesser impediments we have the better it is. Judgements and value judgements like 'this is better than that' is not something applicable on culture. Each group can express itself in whichever way they want to, as long as it does not offend another group's sentiments. Culture is different compared to the other ministries where I have worked for the last 33 years. There you have certain input-output targets, solid timelines. Culture needs a very delicate handling of spontaneous and amorphous expressions. You have to allow them flourish, sometimes one section may or may not like an expression, but that is only a matter of value judgement.

gfiles: Keeping in mind your love for books, I'd like to ask whether you could help the publishing industry in any way as Culture Secretary?

JS: Apart from increasing the Ram Mohan Roy Foundation's budget by almost double and the National Library's—where I grew up—to double, we are seriously considering setting up a library mission by the 12th Plan. We should be in the position to ramp up the effort for libraries and book circulation.

Two schemes have been introduced in the 11th Plan which are very interesting. One is about heritage journals. Commercial establishments don't want to put their advertisements on them. They say that intellectuals are not good buyers. They say that literary magazines don't have deep pockets. So right now, we have a scheme to help heritage journals and magazines, so that every language and every aspect... whether it is folk, theatre, dance, classical music, archaeology, architecture, history everything ... can be covered. And I hope to give a lease of life to those dedicated people who have run them with so much effort. We also want book fairs to be propagated in small towns and have come up with a scheme.

