

# Ageless Jogen Chowdhury

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Among the leading contemporary Indian painters, Jogen Chowdhury is one of the most recognized. His fame transcends the nation's boundary.

As we sat together on 4th April in the evening for an extended tete-a-tete, almost like a marathon chat spread over several hours, it was the culmination of a desire that had taken long to bear fruit.

Whenever we would meet, Jogen da would remark that our long-promised meeting was not materializing. Then, one day when we met, sipping tea together on the deck of a ship anchored on the Hooghly river after an exhibition at Millennium Park, Jogen da fished out his little diary from the depths of the jhola, the nondescript cloth bag that is always slung over his shoulder, and said: "I am not keeping any engagement on the evening of April 4, let us meet then."

We decided that we would meet at his favourite haunt, Kwaliti restaurant at Ballygunge Phari exactly three weeks later. After all, Jogen Chowdhury is a man who is constantly busy -- painting, writing, inaugurating exhibitions and programmes within the country and abroad. He is a man for whom 24 hours is just not enough for his many and varied interests.

As we waited for our orders to be served, we chatted about his childhood and his growing-up years. "Not just drawing or writing, but to create something beautiful is what my heart always desired," he remarked. "To do any good work is passion for me," he added, giving me a glimpse of what makes this man great.

As Jogen da spoke of his life, the struggles and the achievements that slowly became milestones in an illustrious career, I jotted notes in a small writing pad.

Seeing the pad, Jogen da said: "Let me draw a map of my birthplace."

As fluent strokes of the pen flew across the pad, Jogen da kept pace. "I was born on February 16, 1939, at a village in Faridpur's Kotalipara sub-division. The village's name was Dohorpara. The first 8-9 years of my childhood passed in this village, roaming the fields, climbing trees and swimming in the lakes and rivers nearby."

I marveled at his keen memory and alertness and said: "How do you manage it even at the age of 70? In the last 20 years that I have known you, you haven't changed much."

Without pausing from his sketch, Jogen da lifted his head, smiled and said: "Work. It is work which energizes me."

"In my childhood, I joined the Kishorbahini [literally "Army of the Youth"] at our village's Kishore Sangha Club. Kishorbahini was inspired by poet Sukanta Bhatta-charjee. I used to be busy in various activities : writing wall magazines, participating in singing at the ceremonies to mark the birthdays of eminent poets like Rabindranath Tagore and Qazi Nazrul. Even when I grew up, on the occasion of Rabindranath Tagore's centenary in 1961, I illustrated 30 posters. To mark the 400th birth anniversary of Shakespeare, I painted many posters in collaboration with Samik Bando-padhyay," he said in reminiscence.

Fish fingers and potato chips were served at our table. We sipped the drinks and looked at each other.

Jogen da's sketch was almost ready.

The detailed sketch showed his two-storied house made of wood and tin, and the nearby bamboo groves, the lotus-pond and the Kali temple that the surrounding of his house of her childhood. Even the fruit and flower trees of his childhood remain vivid in his memory. He also drew the small rowboat in which his father went to collect tax from the surrounding areas.

Jogen da said "Now I am recollecting the stories of my childhood. But there are so many reminiscences, that this adda will not be long enough to cover my childhood, my youth, my adult years and then my old age".

I said, "Please start with the childhood, let's see where we stop".

Jogen da started again, "In 1947, a few months before Partition, I came to Kolkata with my mother. Later, after Partition, my entire family joined us here as refugees. Till 1951, we stayed in my uncle's Police quarters despite many inconveniences.

"I drew my first picture - that of a peacock with red and blue pencil - on the wall of that house."

Jogen da again started sketching. This time it was the plan of the premises of P-95/B, Monoharpukur Road.

"I, Jhantu and Namita stayed in this room. Kitchen, room of Sundari thakuma, drawing room in this place. There was a sweet shop nearby."

When Jogen da stopped, I requested him to draw the picture of that first peacock. Jogen da obliged.

From 1961 onwards, we started to live in the refugee colony of Dhakuria. It had a simple tiled roof with the sides made with bamboo strips woven together. We couldn't bring anything from Bangladesh. So we didn't have much money. My elder brother's meagre job was the only support. There was no light. We had to buy goods on credit from the grocery shop. When there was no money, we would take great care to avoid the grocery shop."

I asked, "What was the influence of your parents on your painting?"

"My forebearers were zamindars [landowners]. My father, Pramatha-nath Chowdhury also looked after the zamindari. We were a well-to-do Hindu, Brahmin family. Father and Mother both were calm and peace loving by nature. My father's artistic sense and ability influenced me a lot. Father painted a scene at a theatre production of "Sri Krishner Kaliadaman". Father also used to make clay models of many gods and goddesses. Those scenes are very lively still now in my mind's eye. I wished to do something good in life since my childhood. I got an inspiration from an unknown idealism. My mind was driven by 'Mritusojjay Sahajahan' of Abanindranath and 'Shanti Kapot' of Picasso. I always wanted to be positive in my life."

I asked him how he traversed the journey from school life to art college.

Jogen da recounted with a smile. "My first school was Ramrik Haralalka School which was behind the Jadubabu market in Bhowanipur. There I studied till class VI. I never studied in class VII. I was straight away admitted to class VIII at Dwarkanath Vidyapith. I passed School Final examination in the year 1955. After that I joined the Government Art College. Completed my graduation in the

year 1960 from there. I was awarded by both my college and the Academy of Fine Arts for the best water-colour painting. I had not much knowledge about painting before that. Once I had seen pencil sauce paintings being sold at the Gariahat crossing. After that, my elder brother had taken me to an exhibition at the Indian Art College."

"I can remember the first day at Art College. I saw students measuring pictures with a pencil. I didn't understand what they were doing. Professors put a statue in front of us. I made a detail of the statue in the middle of the page. Then I got the interview letter.

"We had many renowned painters as teachers such as Satyen Ghoshal, Sushil Sen, Prodosh Dasgupta. At the time of the interview, I saw many girls. Beautiful girls came from rich families. In those days, girls used to come from rich families and boys from poor families. The girls were Shyamashree Ghosh, Krishna Bose who was a sister of actress Kaberi Bose, Arundhuti Ghosh and dusky, attractive Anita Roy Chowdhury."

The Art College authorities put me in the Sculpture department instead of the Painting department. I stood Second in the First Year. I did well in Third Year and was shifted to the Painting department. I stood first from the Third Year onwards.

"Sunil Das was a good student and admitted in the Second Year. He came from the Indian Art College. Even in those days, he would enthusiastically draw spirited horses. He sketched those pictures on big sheets of paper. We followed him respectfully. I used to go to the stable of the Mounted Police with him at New Market. And used to eat beef rolls which were then available for four annas each.

"Our teacher of Live Study was Mr Debkumar Roychowdhury, an imposing Westernized gentleman in all respects. He returned from Italy and joined the college.

"I can remember the first day of nude study. Both boys and girls would do the nude study together. We were very nervous. The teacher said, 'Go out from the classroom. I will make the model stand'.

"When we boys entered nervously, I saw a nude girl blossoming into womanhood standing in a pose. Her face was innocent and breasts were like the Dalim fruit. She stood without the slightest self-consciousness. The girls in our class were also not talking to each other. Shyamasree, Arundhuti, Anita and Krishna kept on painting quietly. The father of the lady model used to come with her. They were very poor. Sunil used to take the lady to his house as a model. Her father sat in the drawing room. Sunil's lifestyle was like the French painters then. We used to go to his Rajani Bhattacharjee Lane studio. We had seniors like Ganesh Pyne, Debiprosad Saha and Mustafa Manowar.

Even then, Ganesh Pyne would talk little and was serious about his work. He was more comfortable with water colours and tempura than oils. Bikash Bhattacharjee was also a student of Indian College. He was a year junior to me. From the beginning, he used to do outstanding academic work. I got many prizes in the last year of Art College. After that, my fame spread.

I first met Bikash at the Academy of Fine Arts. He was respectful to us because we were a year senior to him. He also became a famous painter. Ganesh da and Bikash became famous as contemporary artists much before I got recognition. I

was not very close to Bikash but had a close relationship with Ganesh da. I respected both for their talent.."

Jogen da stopped with these words.

The watch showed the time to be over 10:30 pm. We left Kwality. I told Jogen da, "Till childhood to college life is covered. But the rest is still pending." Jogen da replied with a smile, "You are seeing the rest. I just showed you how my younger days were."

Jogen da and I went our separate ways. As I traveled down the EM Bypass, I thought how impossible a task it is to capture the stature of such an artist in a few sheets of paper. □□□