

Life and Times of J. Swaminathan

J. Swaminathan — the "bird man" has flown out of "mortal canvas" but his aesthetic spirit, his passion for primeval lives, his literary versatility and symbolic vocabulary still thrive and will continue to kindle man's eternal quest.

"Swami" — as people lovingly called him remained an enigma not only for many but for himself too. He was a gypsy to the core as he was answerable to none but himself. His life traverse proved this spirit as he kept on changing his cloak from "comrade" to "editor", "short story writer" to "political activist", from "medicine" to his aesthetic aspirations enveloped in oil and brush techniques wherein he moved from "pahari miniature" to "space" and then to the tribal culture. He was thus an epitome of versatility and kept on moving from outer to inner — a search for rediscovery. As hon'ble Trustee of IGNC he also kept on guiding the Centre. We pay tribute to this noble soul.

As all great men indicate their spontaneity from childhood days so was the case with Swami. He himself pronounced: "I was born at the juncture of Gemini and Cancer, with the summer solstice imminent on June 21, 1928 — in a hurry." He once recounted: "My mother is no more, but she tells me that I was an impossible child, voraciously hungry for everything, selfish and contrary". This was the beginning of his enigmatic life which continued to scale low and high and often subjugated him to his own higher order. He remained unperturbed — thanks to his "spiritual" sojourn which guided him through upheavals.

After schooling Swami joined a pre-medical course though his inner voice opted for school of arts. Before long, he discovered that "I could draw a cockroach much better than dissect one; I ran away from home and college to Calcutta." To eke out a living, he took up odd jobs but soon he could decipher the revolutionary pulses within him and vowed to serve mother India. A comrade was born and he came back to Delhi finally to join the Congress Socialist Party. He became subeditor of a Hindi short story magazine but had to quit as he was told that the office was not for his afternoon siesta. Then he contemplated as an editor of *Mazdoor Awaz*. In 1948 he joined the Communist Party of India.

He was a comrade of the youth front of CPI but soon started getting disillusioned as he himself recorded: "Such was our madness under the leadership of the megalomaniac BTR who was driving the party to destruction." Nevertheless, he found his destiny — his wife Bhawani. He recounted that in a public meeting "I saw a face which was to transform my life and set me truly on the path of my destiny. Calm and serene.... Bhawani's cast in the classic features of Yakshini.... I met Bhawani and we were married in heaven."

Swami — the artist got baptised to the world of colour at the age of six when his aunt gifted him with Reeves oil colours. He nurtured aesthetics but for long destiny eluded him! Nevertheless, he joined Delhi Polytechnic where Sailoz Mukherjee and Bhavesh Sanyal initiated him to the world of art. But "My art school days ended up as soon as I found it a great strain to attend the evening classes at Kashmiri Gate after a day's hard work", wrote Swaminathan.

In 1957 he went to Warsaw, to fill his life with academic colours as an artist at the Academy of Fine Arts. In 1960 after coming back to India he held the first major public exhibition with P.K. Razadan and N. Dixit. Swami recorded: "I had exhibited my graphic prints done in Warsaw along with the oils..."

Elaborating Swami's earlier works, Isana Murthy aptly wrote: "Swami's greater contribution was in giving Indian sources a contemporary validity and visual identity. His use of flat colours and spaces in his early work is reminiscent of the Indian miniature and I cannot recall anyone before Swami using the vivid Indian yellow in the manner he did."

In the sixties Swami left journalism and took up art and aesthetics as a whole time endeavour. Swami in his autobionote explained his artistic swing and said: "In 60s I made a 180 degree switch in my painting.

I tried to probe the relation of colour to space and after a study of pahari miniatures did a series called the Colour Geometry of space. After the colour geometry show I entered the now famous phase of the bird, the mountain, the tree, the reflection of the shadow and it lasted for quite a while..."



J. Swaminathan

Swaminathan who took an active interest in contemporary art form decried the concept of 'abstract expressionism' as a last word. He viewed that Biren De took to 'abstract' form and others like Padamsee and Raja voiced for 'centrality of the Paris School' and 'fulminating against easel painting' was the point of view of Gujral after spending some time in Mexico as a student of Siqueiros.

Swami thought that Indian art should not be viewed through a Western window and all art forms be placed in their dimension without decrying any other school. Swami further contemplated that younger generations should break fresh grounds otherwise they would end up imitating the elders.

Much contemplations were given a shape by a group consisting of Jeram Patel, Ambadas, Rajesh Mehra, Ghulam Sheikh, Jyoti Bhatt and Raghav Kaneria in August 1962. As a result a Group 1890 was founded, named after the house number of Jayant and Jyoti Pandya in Bhavnagar.

The first and only exhibition of Group 1890 held in October 1963 was inaugurated by Jawaharlal Nehru. This exhibition was introduced by Octavio-Paz who mattered a lot to Swami. Swaminathan wrote: "Octavio is one of those rare geniuses, (who) have the power of devising the submerged intelligence in you and then addressing it as an equal. Talking with him and listening to him is an experience in self-discovery." In tune with this Octavio-Paz wrote *To my Friend Swaminathan, the Painter*:

"The eye explodes
Fountain of signs
The serpentine undulation moves
Wave upon wave of imminent apparitions
The canvas a body
Dressed in its own naked enigma"

Under the influence of Octavio-Paz a new phase was initiated in the life of Swaminathan and he started a journal on art called *Contra 66*. Though shortlived, through this journal Swaminathan created an avenue of rethinking.

Swaminathan in his aesthetic traverse scanned different

symbolisms from different schools and gave a singular vocabulary in his own concept. His concept of contemporary Indian art vis-a-vis Western thought was that "the Western civilizational time scale need not be our yardstick, and the being of man need not be sacrificed at the altar of becoming, for his not being the immutable experience of quanta in the wave of becoming! Historical progression, like the birnam wood, as an illusion: change yes, but progress no. The notion of progress in art is a precious doctrine." With such ideas in mind he started the work of completing the museum (the Bharat Bhavan). On seeing this live multiart centre the then Prime Minister Shrimati Indira Gandhi remarked

"Centre of culture has shifted from Delhi to Bhopal".



Oil on Canvas 1992 by J. Swaminathan (Photo Courtesy : Gallery Espace)

From the days of Bharat Bhavan and beyond, his love for the tribal culture began in the eighties. He wrote: "Madhya Pradesh brought about a basic shift in my painting again the life and vibrant contact with tribal cultures triggered off my natural bent for the primeval."

Swami brought the tribal art of Central India into contemporary focus through Bharat Bhavan. Swami was among the first who bagged Nehru Fellowship, through his thesis titled 'Relevance of the Traditional Neumen to Contemporarity Art' remained unfinished but it was the beginning of understanding the tribal psyche which he later translated through oil shades.

While writing the book *Magical Script* on the drawings by the hill Korwas of Jashpur, Raigarh, (Madhya Pradesh), Swaminathan wrote that "cultural experiences and activity in India is a multi-level phenomenon — and these levels are often mutually independent and non-interacting — it is the urban and the so-called modern sense of contemporarity that appears to dominate the scene and thus to distort the real perspective".

Likewise, Swaminathan pondered over the tribal culture and throughout his life he kept on addressing the people and tried to give the tribal expressions a proper place in the global art and cultural fora.

As an artist and a man of institutions he kept on guiding people from all walks of life who value culture and human endeavour in wider perspective.

Gautam Chatterjee