



LINES OF THOUGHT

KESHAV VENKATARAGHAVAN

"The artist is a receptacle for emotions that come from all over the place; from the sky, from the earth, from a scrap of paper, from a passing shape, from a spider's web"

On a very hot may afternoon, over a meeting that stretched to almost a couple of hours, I could understand the essence of the above quote of Picasso. As someone who grew up looking at his cartoons in The Hindu, I had sub-consciously developed an image of him before the meeting. At the end of our meeting I realized how multi-faceted he was, how deep his world views were and how big his canvas was - all these wrapped in humility and simplicity. To see him in action, sitting in one corner of the room, leaning over his desk with his pencil/brush in hand and magic getting created – you realize cartooning is serious business.

"Keshav" as he is known to all readers of The Hindu, comes from an orthodox family and grew up in an atmosphere of bhajans and margazhi festivities (which perhaps contributed to the latent 'Krishna' consciousness in him). Born in Bengaluru, Keshav did his schooling in Hyderabad and even as a child, started drawing scenes of every day life – it was either chalk piece on the floor or pencil on the wall.

He came to Chennai, finished his graduation and dabbled with CA articleship before he went on to work with a Bank. He was contributing parallelly to Ananda Vikatan as a cartoonist. It was at a Hindustan Times cartoon contest in 1986, where he received encouragement and recognition from leading cartoonists, that made him send samples of his work to The Hindu. The Hindu found them interesting and he quit his bank job to join them full time in 1987.

"Every child is an artist and everyone doodles or draws, but one has to work on inherent interest and has to continuously practice to improve". He goes on to add that 'observation' is important for an artist

and drawing out of memory was always better than drawing from seeing a picture.

Keshav updates himself watching news channels, tracking news stories on the TV / internet which helps him come up with ideas, backed by facts. With the advent of internet it is a lot easier to gather news, trending topics. Before internet, it used to be half a day reading various magazines, newspapers – international included, watching TV and in general observe and watch what was happening around.

He further adds "the mood of the day should be felt and followed" and it was not

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the publication which decides the idea for the day. Not being able to come up with an idea could perhaps be the worst thing for an artist. Keshav said "actually it is the case almost every day. It is a challenge to come up with fresh and new ideas every day". To get the message to hit the reader within a small time frame makes the challenge worth taking. He went on to explain that in cartooning 'ideating' takes most part of the time and sketching only about 20-30 minutes.

Ambling around his quiet home, one would notice that the subject of almost all of his paintings was 'Krishna'. Even on the social media websites, most of his drawings of the day are based on Krishna. Curious to know what made him take so many liberties with Krishna, I asked him 'Why Krishna?' Taking a deep breath and with his characteristic smile, Keshav said "Krishna to me represents freedom, compassion, love for other life forms,



shanthi etc., Just like the Statue of Liberty, the Vedas have projected Krishna – the pose, the bliss, the music etc. – as the symbol of liberty". He said that Krishna was later a fixation for him when he started to read a lot of Vedanta, philosophy and mythology. It was then he started keeping Krishna as a constant and experimented around him. Almost sensing my next question, he spelt out "my Krishna is a-religious"

Keshav draws inspiration from a host of artists and cartoonists – Mali, Gopulu, Raju, Laxman and David Low. He said The Hindu "taught me life and everything else. It has been a life of learning under great editors over time". He also clarified, though The Hindu had its own basic beliefs / perspectives, it never interfered in his ideas or forced its views on him.

Keshav explained the differences between a cartoon and a drawing. He also feels that the term 'cartoon' is one of the most misunderstood terms. People immediately associate cartoon to mocking and also have

the perception that it is anti-establishment. He explained how cartoons translate public anger into humour taking it one step ahead of anger.

As an artist who has embraced social media, he feels that it gave him the freedom to put whatever he paints, online – as he doesn't make a living out of it. Also it helps him get a direct feedback on his work. Keshav uses digital tools for colouring and believes that one has to embrace new techniques and technology all the time, though he still prefers hand drawing to the digital medium. He is happy that there are a lot of opportunities for digital artists though digital arts and installations are still to happen in India in a big way... he hurries to add "the world is changing and people look at what the message is and not what medium it is in"

Keshav feels that an artist should be given his margin of freedom, should be judged by his whole body of works and not just by one painting / work. He also clarifies



that the artistic freedom should not take the form of perversion. Keshav has conducted a couple of art shows and finds it a rewarding experience, though time-consuming. Here again most of the paintings are based on Krishna - his dance, his drama, his music and his message. Keshav also says that music has been one immense source of inspiration for him and felt that 'bhava' is as integral to painting as it was to music, dance and sculpture.

On cartoon as a career option in India, Keshav said that the art form is more appreciated in the South, but given the long gestation typically 12-15 years where one had to put in hard work, dedication, learning - it was turning out to be financially not viable. He also explained that an aspiring cartoonist has to observe life, nature, practice continuously, read a lot and also have tons of patience.

Hearing Keshav, one will realise the enormity of efforts that goes in to those cartoons we all get to see in the newspapers every day and give an attention span of maybe 10-15 seconds. It is people like Keshav who make you appreciate "If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him". Keshav not just talked about cartoons and paintings in general, but evoked collective realisation. Perhaps it is this quality that



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made certain artists resonate more strongly than others and make them an inspiration for others.

Keshav has been steadfast in bringing up the collective feelings of the public, through a visual form that echoes their thoughts in a humorous way, without being provocative or preachy. He is a true Champion of Chennai.

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