



Shombit Sengupta: The art brand

The maverick founder of Shining Consulting on connecting with the consumer, why he doesn't believe in start-ups, and seeking reinvention at 63



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Illustration by Jayachandran/Mint

In his 2013 book *Zen Garden: Conversations With Pathmakers*, Subroto Bagchi, co-founder of IT firm Mindtree, recalls being tipped off about Shombit Sengupta ahead of their first meeting in 1999. “I was told that if you did not have a budget of a crore as

consulting fee, you didn't go to Shombit. But wait a minute. There was another condition—he had to like you!” he writes about the man who, he says, taught him “more about brands...than anyone else in my entire career”.

The trouble, though, is that Sengupta no longer wants to talk about brands. At 63, the founder and creative strategist of Shining Consulting, responsible for the consumer interface makeover of companies such as Unilever, Nestlé, Procter & Gamble, Rémy Martin, Johnson & Johnson, Wipro and Mahindra & Mahindra, would rather concentrate on his art. It's the reason why, after 40-odd years in France, he now prefers to spend 60% of his time in India. In Bengaluru, to be precise, where, many years ago, he bought a dilapidated transformer factory in Whitefield and redesigned it into an abode like no other. It's tempting to see the house, split into two wings, as a metaphor for Sengupta's own life, divided between France and India, brand design and art.

The two parts of the house are connected by a labyrinthine corridor; the walls have Sengupta's own exuberant artworks while the floor space resembles a fairground, installed with the most dazzling collection of colourful Indian kitsch: shiny lip balms, glittery balls, skeins of crinkled cotton, stacks of glass bangles. It's all a bit overwhelming.

Like the man himself. Kitted out in a sheep-print shirt, his shock of hair still more pepper than salt, Sengupta demands attention as he talks. His story is so fantastic, it's hard to look away but it does not do to merely follow his words: He needs total engagement. He responds in kind, listening actively and often stepping outside himself to call you out. As he does when his wife Renee Jhala, managing director of Shining Consulting—they met while he was consulting with Wipro, where she was head of public relations—wafts by: “She is making me talk about the brands,” he mock-complains about me, but acknowledges in the next breath that the success that followed his disruptive approach to design and branding allowed him to reboot his life as a sexagenarian to focus on art.

"I read a lot. Among books that left a deep impression on me are 'Das Kapital', 'The Little Red Book', 'Bhagavad Gita'. Also, the biographies of Leonardo da Vinci, Salvador Dali, Sigmund Freud. In fiction, Victor Hugo and Guy de Maupassant are favourites, along with Bengal's Sankar—he based his 'Manab Sagar Tirey' on my life—and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. I don't like Rabindranath Tagore, he could never touch me the way Saratbabu did. I have read 'Pather Dabi' at least 10 times."

“I went into business (as a brand consultant) to earn money,” Sengupta says without preamble. “And I stuck around for 35 years. Art has always informed my work. But I never delivered something that only looked good; my work made businesses look good.”

Aesthetics, one might think, was not supposed to be the strong suit of a boy born in a camp for East Pakistan refugees in Kanchrapara, West Bengal. But early on, Sengupta developed an appreciation of his surroundings. If the Bengali Bengal was defined by poverty, the Victorian Bengal was embodied in the British-built residence of his schoolteacher-mother's friend. In Chandannagar, a row or a swim across the Hooghly, he encountered a third Bengal, a French Bengal. His father, a committed Communist and anti-British activist, had French sympathies—he was a fan of the Vincent van Gogh biopic *Lust For*

Life, which portrayed the Dutch artist's flowering in Paris—and subtly communicated to the young boy that an art education, to be worthwhile, had to be French.

And so it was that at the age of 19, only half-done with his course at the Government College of Art and Craft in what was still Calcutta, Sengupta bought himself a ticket to Paris for Rs2,700, the sale proceeds of his mother's gold bangles. "I could barely speak English, let alone French," says Sengupta, his English still thickly accented by Bengali. "But I had a skill in art and I was determined to develop it."

Though Sengupta went on to join *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris*, the national school of fine arts, and then studied design at *École Supérieure d'Arts Graphiques Penninghen*, formal degrees were not his forte. Perpetually short of funds and compelled to send money home, Sengupta took up any work he could find, from sweeping floors to assisting lithographers. "Intelligence or leadership are not qualities you learn in school. Apprenticeship is very important. I was always drawn to writers, advocates, psychologists, performing artistes—that was the way I nurtured myself, how I learnt to converge different elements when it came to branding and design as well."

A considerable part of Sengupta's success as a brand guru championing a "consumer connect" must be laid at the door of this carefully cultivated understanding of multiple disciplines. "Art was the only way I could earn. Yves Brayer, a famous artist I met at the lithographer's, encouraged me to consider design communication. So I studied graphic design, applied art, photography, typography. But once in the field, I found I was completely different from everybody. Because of my multiple interests, areas of expertise and a humanist outlook, I made for a grand solutions provider. I can diagnose an ailing business the way a good doctor diagnoses a patient.

"Also, my language was completely different," Sengupta says. "So, if a chief executive officer came to me and said his product was 'premium', I would ask him, what's premium about a consumer product? Affordability is a different issue but, by labelling yourself 'premium', you're alienating a huge market."

His maverick approach included hanging out at a *kirana*, or neighbourhood grocery store, to figure out why large cooking-oil containers weren't selling, and picking up the Britannia tag line *Eat Healthy, Think Better* from a Kolkata rickshaw-puller. Business magazines lavished pages on him, a colourful, plain-speaking break from the pinstriped politically correct.

At its peak, the Shining client list read like the who's who of the corporate world: Prominent among them were 3M, Dow Chemicals, Carrefour, Intermarché, Corning/Newell, Henkel, Nivea, L'Oréal, Pernod Ricard, Reckitt Benckiser, Galerie Lafayette-Monoprix, Total Petroleum internationally, and Reliance Retail, Madura Garments, Coffee Day, Jindal Steel & Power in India.

Of late, Sengupta has consciously cut down consulting engagements to a few select clients, mostly in Europe. But, out of the corner of his eye, he continues to pick up on trends and behaviours in the market. Pet among his peeves are Indian businesses that aim to be conglomerates rather than single-domain enterprises. "I give them 15-20 years, they won't last beyond that," he says. "Before the Tatas launched the Nano, I had said it wouldn't work—and it didn't. When businesses believe in one thing, they can nurture people, build expertise. I hope the new generation will follow that path. Take Airtel. (Sunil Bharti

Mittal) tried a couple of other things but his focus was one. Infosys, too, has focused on one domain.

“As for the young people working on start-ups, I always tell them, don’t go for start-ups—shorthand for make money and go away—go for build-ups. All businesses have always been start-ups. All this new language is totally nonsense!”

In the second hour of our conversation, we are sitting at a worktable in his sprawling, double-height studio, with its curving walls and natural light. All around us are works old and new: Some acrylic-on-canvas frames from Sengupta’s 2016 *Night Spirit* series, depicting the owl in various mythologies; a few of the tiled *Désordre* installation series—first made in 2008—which viewers are invited to scramble like a jigsaw puzzle; multiple large canvases featuring a woman and a horse that gallerist Vickram Sethi places in a metaphysical/sexual lineage dating back to the legend of Lady Godiva. He last showed at the Institute of Contemporary Indian Art, Kala Ghoda, Mumbai, in November; a couple of exhibitions are lined up in Europe later this year.

For all the workload, art has always been a mainstay for Sengupta. “Art was the foundation of my work,” he says simply, when I ask him how he juggled the two (he was also a weekly columnist for *The Indian Express* between 2009-14, and is the author of the *Jalebi* trilogy, on managing businesses in India). “I don’t sleep for more than 4-5 hours a day. Only between 1978-84 did art take a back seat, because I was setting up Shining. But even then, my sketchbook never left my side.

“Around 1994, I realized it was important for an artist to develop his own school of thought. That’s when I came up with the concept of Gesturism, basing it on a professor’s early appreciation of the kinetic energy in my works. My style changed completely after that. But Renee pointed out that my art was too Cartesian (after René Descartes, whose philosophy was the bedrock of continental rationalism), too European. I needed to re-root myself in India to define my identity, unite my French inspiration and sense of structure with the non-dogmatic, indisciplined way India uses colour. A third factor was my examination of the *désordre*—disorder in the French sense, related to physical objects—in India.”

In a life so packed with activity, art and accolades, turning 60 was a milestone. “Renee pushed me to devote more time to art at that juncture,” says Sengupta. “Fine art is pre-civilizational; design is a post-industrialization phenomenon, aiming to satisfy a human need, stated or unstated. Art, on the other hand, is completely individual; it needs no other justification.”

As we wind down our conversation, the canvases around us look on. Each of them bears the flamboyant Sen signature: The artist prefers to use a truncated version of the family name for his work. Interestingly, his son from his first marriage, too, shortened his name Saikat to Shoi. As Shoi Sen, marketing man-turned-lead guitarist for British band De Profundis, he opened for Iron Maiden in Bengaluru in 2009. Reinvention, it seems, is a family trait.

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