

Sati Achath, Shadow Master

There is no doubt that Sati Achath is an expert in his field. He might even be the only person with the ability to transform his hands into shadow likenesses of more than 100 celebrities and 50 animals and birds. This unusual talent saw him take fourth place in the 2008 *America's Got Talent* TV show. Not that this was his first TV appearance. In the late '90s he was featured on a host of shows including the *Late Show with David Letterman*, CNN, CBS and ABC News. Achath's talents are diverse and always increasing – even if it is only step-by-step, a few minutes a day over several years – a concept he calls 'incrementalism'. Nick Rice took up a little of his well-managed time with a few questions.

Ventriloquist, hand shadow master, magician and caricaturist, you're definitely multi-talented. Where and when did it all begin?

I learned hand shadows as a child, from my father C.K. Menon, in India. He had developed several hand shadow images on his own and used to give performances in India. Once I learned this art I developed it further, focusing more on creating shadow profiles of personalities. Ventriloquism I learned in 1995 from Steve Myers, a professional ventriloquist in Maryland, USA. Along with my wife Minnie, I took lessons for about six months. I learned magic in 1993 in the US, on my own, by reading books and watching videos. I have been drawing cartoons and caricatures since 1976. Also, as I had always wanted to learn some musical instruments, in the last five or six years I have taught myself to play the bamboo flute, Tabla (Indian percussive instrument), piano and harmonica.

Most people would be happy with just those talents, but you also speak six languages and hold four master's degrees. Which languages do you speak and what degrees do you have?

I speak English, French, Spanish, and three Indian languages – Hindi, Tamil and Malayalam. The master's degrees are in English Literature, International Economic Relations, Business Administration (MBA) and Finance.

You're also a motivational speaker and show people how to nurture their skills and become multi-talented. Any advice?

It is not at all difficult for us to nurture our skills and become multi-talented. With some proper time management and persistence, anybody can develop his or her hidden talents and even learn new skills. Self-motivation is an important factor.

The US Government has recognised you as a 'person of extraordinary ability'. Is that for your entertaining skills or your academic prowess?

I was recognised as an artist, based on my achievements in hand shadows, cartooning, caricaturing, ventriloquism and magic.

How do you go about inventing and perfecting shadow caricatures?

As a caricaturist, it is quite easy for me to observe the prominent features of a celebrity. Once I pick up the unique facial characteristics, I play around with my hands in front of a light and within a couple of days time I am able to perfect his or her shadow caricature. That done, I don't usually need any more practice.

Which ones are your favourites?

Among personalities, some of my favourite shadow caricatures are Richard Nixon; Bill Clinton; Jimmy Carter; Winston Churchill and Michael Jackson. Among birds and animals, it's duck swimming; rabbit running away; elephant dancing and bird flying. In addition, the story of a husband and wife arguing and finally making up with a warm hug and kiss is also my favourite and it is definitely the most popular one with audiences.

You came fourth in the 2008 *America's Got Talent* show. Was it nerve racking to be on national TV?

No, I've been performing for so many years and I had already appeared on television shows before.

David Letterman called you the 'Master of Hand Shadows'. That's quite a unique title to have.

Yes, I definitely feel honoured to have received such a wonderful description from him.

Opposite page:
A self-caricature by Sati Achath. His work has been featured in many newspapers.



You have a day job as a Project Evaluation Specialist for the World Bank, you entertain, give motivational talks, and your caricatures have appeared in more than 25 national newspapers. Where do you find the time?

I only need about six hours of sleep, and I get up every day around 4 A.M. That gives me lot of spare time to pursue my hobbies, and I am also careful with my time management.

What does a typical day look like in the life of Sati Achath?

In the morning, after I check my emails and finish my exercise for the day, I pursue my various hobbies. Then I start my work for the World Bank. In the evening, I spend some time with my wife and watch TV with her. After dinner, I normally spend a few hours to practice a musical instrument or pursue other hobbies, such as reading.

It's fair to say that you're a pretty unique person. What is the best part of living in your world?

Having varied interests in life, devoting time to pursue them, and trying to be good at each of them. ❖

From top:
Bill Clinton; Richard Nixon; Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln