

# Bangabandhu and I: Memories of an artist

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Those days when the platoon commander led his team through what can simply be described as horrors and glories of the war, finally came to end, with the valiant freedom fighters emerging victorious.

War was over. The freedom fighters were called on to return their weapons. And it was at the arms surrender ceremony when Shahabuddin met Bangabandhu.

"He looked at me with an air of affection. He asked where I studied, and when I replied that I was a student of Dhaka Art College (now Faculty of Fine Art, University of Dhaka), and that I paint, it struck a chord in him; he was pleasantly surprised and felt very proud.

"You are a freedom fighter and an artist! My children can also paint!" Shahabuddin still remembers Bangabandhu's reaction.

The impressed Mujib asked him to bring his artworks one day.

## BANGABANDHU AND ART

Shahabuddin continued his story, with a lot of zeal and a world of love that he has for Bangabandhu.

In one corner of the studio, he sat, narrating from memory.

The studio itself is a beautiful one, with iconic artworks on walls and canvases and a table crowded with paintbrushes and palettes.

But the man was not in his studio, I felt. He had gone back to the early '70s, to Bangabandhu.

He continued passionately, "I went to meet him, with a large painting of mine, concealed in a white cloth. Everyone there was astounded by its size. But when anyone asked, I initially said it was by some other artist; I felt shy."

Afterwards Bangabandhu too, showed a lot of enthusiasm: "Such a large painting! Open it!"

The artwork, which depicted Mujib as a prisoner, impressed him.

"At least this much I can understand that our children can create such amazing works of art! I will display it. Because so many foreigners come to my place. They

will appreciate it. I will tell them that our children can fight for freedom, and they can also create works of art," the painter narrated Bangabandhu's response in his own words, in a shaky, excited voice, while staring blankly with eccentric eyes, as if, by some means, a supernatural portal had opened up in his studio through which he could see that past event happening in front of him.



Shahabuddin is not just a painter. He is a master storyteller; painting is merely the medium he chose, I reckon.

The tucked out red shirt with a gamcha wrapped around the waist, the ruffled hair, the facial expressions which bring forth every emotion he feels, the animated way in which he speaks, the purest amicable smile with which he radiates warmth — all make him stand out of the crowd and force the listener to sit at the edge of the chair, gulping in his many stories.

He continued, reliving his Bangabandhu-and-I moments: "He was such a busy man. He need not bother about my painting. But he did."

It may be claimed that Sheikh Mujib had an admiration for artists. His enthusiasm and respect towards Zainul Abedin for example, hints towards that. He even encouraged Shahabuddin to go to Paris in order to further pursue the field (which he did; where he continues to live).

Shahabuddin had the opportunity to be around Bangabandhu several times. "I used to just observe him," he said.

Perhaps, those experiences firmly carved

in his mind the image of Mujib forever, which directly or indirectly, continue to provide a big influence and inspiration whenever he picks up the brush to portray the man.

## A PAINTER'S BANGABANDHU

The celebrated artist's works are on display in museums across the world. Other than Bangabandhu, freedom fighters, martyrdom of intellectuals, and his study on horses are a few examples of his works.

His style sometimes prompts the words 'speed' and 'movement'. His subjects are often in motion, in frenzy — a muscular body jolting forward, for example.

When I see his paintings, particularly those made with free-flowing brush strokes that depict speed or movement, I personally feel that they radiate an aura of rebellion and freedom, an urge to break



shackles, and oddly enough, an impatient ambition.

As for Bangabandhu on his canvas, there is a fluidity which registers the eye. The figure is often incomplete, vague in some places. In place of that, there is enigma.

Of course, Mujib's distinctive appearance — from the black Mujib coat over white panjabi to his spectacles to the hair brushed back — even when portrayed on the canvas, brings forward his persona.

The various paintings of Mujib by Shahabuddin remind you of the different aspects of the leader.

Bangabandhu with a raised arm and finger is reminiscent of the blazing speech

of 7 March, 1971, for example.

"Some people say that I still live in 1971. Yes, luckily I do. I don't want to forget those golden days. And I want to show them to the world. I want to make people dream," he declared.

Another painting worth mentioning is the one where Bangabandhu is seen sitting with his head bowed down. His forehead rests over his clasped hands, bearing the weight of his head. His hair, brushed back. His face, partly covered by his hands, is not clearly visible.

A very powerful portrait indeed!

"He has in his head all the world's problems. Will he be able to bear them?" Shahabuddin mused when asked about the painting.

Many years ago, in 1971, while the war was still going on, Shahabuddin came back to his house in Dhaka. He went to the room where he used to paint, to check on his paintings which he put under the bed mattress before he left.

They were safe. He hugged them tightly. Such was the love for art and his dream to become an artist.

Shahabuddin Ahmed fulfilled his dream. A master painter he became!

And his portrayals of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman are a reflection of that, successfully capturing the mammoth personality within the confinements of a canvas.

And finally, even the painting which portrays this great leader's assassination — a wounded Mujib lying with his face down — is very moving. It marks the end of his life, but he shall remain forever in our hearts — celebrating his birth centenary is a testament to that.

Bangabandhu is larger than life.

By M H Haider

Photo: Orchid Chakma

Special thanks to artist Shahabuddin Ahmed for his interview, based on which this feature has been written. In addition to that, his book titled 'Amar Muktiyudha', an autobiographical piece, also provided valuable insights for the write-up.



# ফাস্ট ওয়াশ

## সাদা আব এক নাম







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