

# Justice for Sinha can initiate justice for others too

KAMAL AHMED

“THE Police does not shoulder the responsibility of any misdeed committed by an individual”, claims the Bangladesh Police Service Association (BPSA), a representative body of the members of the police cadre in the country. The statement was aimed at calming tensions created due to the unfortunate extrajudicial killing of Major (ret) Rashed Md Khan Sinha in Cox’s Bazar by a police team.

It must be noted that till now, none of the members of the BPSA have been named in the Sinha murder case. However, the irony was, on the day the association issued the statement, one of its members, an SP of Rajshahi Range, was sued in Dhaka for the abduction and extortion of a businessman. Besides, some more stories appeared in the media in the last few days alleging police excesses, extortion, corruption and another extrajudicial killing in the same Cox’s Bazar district, which appears to be a pattern throughout the country.

The BPSA statement claimed that Bangladesh Police took action against the wrongdoers earlier and that this practice would continue in future. But the facts do not bear out such statements. In fact, this particular mentality—that any wrongdoing should be apportioned on individuals rather than the enabling structures and cohorts—foster more abuses, more corruption and an erosion of public trust. No wonder the opening lines of a decade-old report of the International Crisis Group (ICG) on Bangladesh police still remains valid and relevant. The report said, “After decades of misuse and neglect, Bangladesh’s police are a source of instability and fear rather than a key component of a democratic society. Human rights abuses are endemic and almost all Bangladeshis who interact with the police complain of corruption.”

The ICG in that report warned that if the police continue to be used for political ends, the force may be damaged beyond repair at a great cost, not only to Bangladesh’s citizens but also to current and future elected governments. Given the role the police has played in crackdowns on opposition and silencing dissent, over-enthusiastically acting

like members of the ruling party during elections and extracting impunity from the political masters, one may reasonably assume that we have reached the state that was predicted by the ICG.

The outcry for justice for Sinha is a wakeup call to look beyond one particular crime, and instead identify the institutional faults. It should start from rejecting the notion that all crimes committed by members wearing the badges of a security force have nothing to do with the institution. The recent backlash against institutional racism in policing in the United States has forced politicians and police to review and reform policing. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has resulted in police forces being defunded by quite a few local authorities, which for long ignored the need for change.

Luckily, so far, racism is not that visible in Bangladesh but power and influence have become major factors in policing. In this context, a possible backlash on policing for the few and privileged should not be discounted. Our focus should be now on reforming the police and ensuring justice



PHOTO: COLLECTED

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for all. For too long we have focused on symptoms and not the cause. Justice for Sinha should pave the way for justice for all the victims of extrajudicial killings and abuses.

The most frequent answer the authorities love to utter is that reforms require in-depth study and time. But the fact is that a comprehensive study under the auspices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was undertaken and its recommendations, which were submitted in July 2012, remain largely ignored. Among many other findings, its most crucial analysis is that the Police Act 1861 places great emphasis on accountability to the government but less importance on accountability to the law and to the community, which is against democratic principles. The study says that in a democracy, “police have an obligation to be accountable to the law, elected representatives and the community”. It clearly states, “notwithstanding the Bangladesh Police’s move to establish the Police Internal Oversight body, failure of the 1861 Act to

institute some form of independent and external review of police misconduct is a glaring omission”.

It is true that the current government, during the early years in its first term, brought in some measures which some people felt were encouraging and positive. The most notable among those were improving pay and provisions, and an apparent attempt to involve communities in policing. But, like any other half-hearted reform initiative, it failed miserably. Community engagement became another tool to make police work for the ruling party, instead of the society. Monthly meetings at police stations with so-called “civil society” representatives became farcical and in some cases, conspiratorial against opponents and rivals of local MPs and leaders of the ruling party.

Without an external oversight mechanism, as the forces of accountability gradually shifted more to the party in power, abuse of power for financial gains became rampant as well. Doubling of salary and other financial incentives did not work to discourage

corruption; rather demands and greed reached an unprecedented level.

The impunity issue was best summarised last year by the United Nations Committee on Torture (UNCAT) when it observed, “The Committee is further concerned at reports that there is no independent body authorised to carry out investigations into allegations of torture by officials, so investigations are carried out by officers from the same units or within the same official hierarchy as the alleged perpetrators, resulting in conflicts of interest.”

Among many other recommendations, the most important one it made was establishing an investigation mechanism to handle complaints regarding torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement officials that is independent of law enforcement agencies, including the police hierarchy. It also called for legislations ensuring effective victim and witness protection. The need for such legislation can easily be felt if anyone looks at the abuses and harassment by members of the police force on social media against the co-workers of Sinha. Its recommendations include ensuring an oversight body’s monitoring role in the progress of investigations into allegations of torture. We should now make it a priority that these recommendations are fully implemented as soon as possible.

In an extraordinary move, the administrative probe body set up by the government into Sinha’s killing is holding a public hearing into the circumstances and issues related to the incident. The hearing may not have any bearing on the criminal investigation and prosecution, but it shows that similar public hearings in all other alleged extrajudicial killings are possible. Therefore, a public enquiry into all alleged extrajudicial killings headed by a Supreme Court judge with judicial powers should be instituted as soon as possible. Establishing a judicial probe does not require any new legislation. We urge the government to establish a judicial commission and make the truth come out. Justice for Sinha should open up the way to justice for others too.

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## TRIBUTE

# Remembering Murtaja Baseer: The master of ‘abstract realism’

On August 15, eminent artist, poet, litterateur and Language Movement veteran Murtaja Baseer passed away after losing his battle with coronavirus. In memory of this versatile genius, we are reprinting an interview that came out in Star Weekend Magazine on August 24, 2007

ASHA MEHREEN AMIN

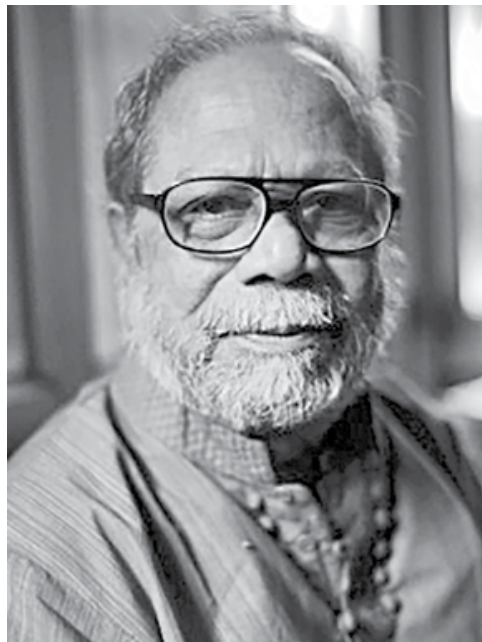
AT 75, Murtaja Baseer is as agile and hyperactive as a child, with a mind as sharp and clear. In his cosy apartment in Manipuripara, Baseer eagerly shows his oil paintings stacked against the walls and explains the various phases that he has gone through as an artist and the mentors who have helped him along the way.

Taking up art as a profession was somewhat decided by providence rather than a conscious personal choice. In 1947, Baseer was in class nine and was already influenced by Marxism. He became a member of the student wing of the communist party and drew pictures of Marx, Engels and Lenin for the Party. It was this association that paved his entry into the world of art and that heavily influenced the themes and subjects that he was to depict in his work throughout his life. The Party wanted to form cadres in all educational institutions and so Baseer was asked to join the Government Art Institute set up by Zainul Abedin.

At first, his father Dr Muhammad Shahidullah, a prominent scholar of literature and language and a doctorate holder from Paris’s famous Sorbonne University, was not particularly excited about Baseer’s academic choice. But his son’s eagerness won him over and even induced him to give Baseer two rare volumes on the Louvre Museum that he had kept locked in his library for years. That was ample encouragement for the delighted 16 and a half-year-old, who spent hours studying the books and learning from them.

But Baseer’s early days as an art student were far from smooth sailing. He was still very involved with left politics that ended him in jail for five months after he was caught putting up a Party poster on the wall. After being released, when Baseer came back to the Institute, he felt alienated and was apathetic enough to want to give up art altogether. “I told Zainul Abedin, my teacher, that I would give up”, says Baseer, “but he said ‘no’ and called for Aminul Islam, one of his most brilliant and favourite students and a year senior to me.” Aminul, with whom he shared the same political ideology, helped Baseer to get back on track and to improve his drawing and painting.

It was when he was in the second year that Baseer experienced an unpleasant experience that actually led him to start painting in oil. “I was doing a drawing in one of the classes when my teacher tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to get up and give my seat to another student Razzak, who always stood



Murtaja Baseer (1932-2020)

FILE PHOTO

first in class. I knew I wasn’t a very good student but I felt extremely insulted and ended up sitting in the corridor with tears streaming down my face.” It was at that moment that the famous Safiuddin Ahmed, then a teacher at the Institute, stopped and asked him why he was crying. When he heard what had happened, Ahmed took him home, an unusual gesture for the reserved teacher from Kolkata. “I was a little surprised”, says Baseer, “there were oil paintings done by him all over the place; Safiuddin was famous for his woodcuts at the time.”

It was Safiuddin who encouraged Baseer to start doing oil paintings, often taking the young student along to various spots to paint. Baseer says that incident taught him a lot. Later as a Professor of Fine Arts at Chittagong University, Baseer says he always made sure that he would first go to the worst student in the class. “I think a teacher is successful,” says Baseer, “if he or she can uplift the weakest students.” When Baseer was asked at the interview board that decided on his professorship what he taught, he replied with “Nothing”, further explaining—“I never impose my personality on my students, I only try to help them.”

Baseer acquired this way of thinking from his first mentor Zainul Abedin who, says Baseer, never encouraged his students to be like their teacher but urged them to try to develop on their own.

It was after 1954, in Kolkata where he

went to take an art appreciation course at the Ashutosh Museum, that Baseer met Paritosh Sen who had just come back from Paris. Baseer was impressed with Sen’s minimalism and his style of painting with palette knife. During his stay in Kolkata, he also learnt the technique of mixing water colours from famous painter Dilip Das Gupta.

Baseer says that it was in Florence, where he went for higher studies, that he was drawn to the pre-Renaissance painters such as Giotto, Cimabue, Duccio, Fra Angelico and others from the 13th and 14th centuries.

“I liked the simplified drawing of these artists”, says Baseer, “with their absence of perspective or shades of light.” “Around ‘57, ‘58 I thought of something: that there is no such thing as so-called background and so I started superimposing in light and shade, making the main subject transparent.” This translucent effect is found in many of his works such as *Somnambular Ballad* (1959), *The Gypsy* (1958) and *Man with Accordion* (1959), with traces of this even in later works in other media such as *Girl with Flower*.

The 60s proved to be another important

“transparencism” phase. A brief period of despondency while in Lahore resulted in his depicting the darker side of life in *Girl with Lizard* and *Dead Lizard*, which he did in Dhaka.

In 1962, the artist got married and this is when he developed yet another style. “My life became very organised and structured”, says Baseer, “and this was reflected in my work.” The geometric shapes and female forms of his paintings at that time portrayed the emotional stability of the artist.

Baseer was always drawn to realism and the abstraction of modern art did not really appeal to him. “But I felt I was not in the mainstream with everyone moving towards the abstract; I started getting a complex”, says Baseer. The artist remarks that he does not believe in pure abstract, which is often the result of alienation and angst of those societies in which life has become mechanical and vacant. The claustrophobia the country was facing in the late 60s however, influenced him to come up with his *Wall* series, which seemed to be the closest he had come to abstract art. But as far as Baseer

distancing in relationships.

In 1971, Baseer escaped to Paris with his family, fearing arrest for his involvement in the independence movement. It was during his stay in Paris that the *Epitaph for the Martyrs* series was done, inspired by the colours enmeshed in pebbles that he found on a Parisian street. The understated colours and forms of the pebbles represented a solemn epitaph for the martyrs who had died and were dying. In 1975, Baseer received the Shilpakala Academy Award, especially for his *Epitaph* series. He was awarded the Ekushey Padak in 1980.

In 1978, Baseer did a few paintings in his *Jyoti* series using religious motifs from prayer mats, scriptures and charms.

Baseer is very wary of repetition and says he stops as soon as he detects any sign of it in his work. Which is why he admires Picasso so much for his constant attempt to be innovative. He describes his “abstract realism” as the attempt to blend the vision of a Renaissance painter with the mind of an impressionist. The *Wings* series of the late 90s for example, is a completely new phase. The magnifying of a part of a butterfly wing in all its spectacular pattern and colour is a defiant protest and optimism against the degeneration of modern society. Again, in 1980, *The Light* series showed another form of work based on Quranic verses. “I was heavily criticised for this work”, says Baseer, “I do not see any contradiction between religion and progress. Bangali Muslims are very progressive but that does not mean they are atheists.” Baseer adds that the work of artists like Michelangelo and Rembrandt were heavily influenced by religious motifs so it is very natural for artists to use religion as a theme.

Baseer, the eternal optimist, is very hopeful about the future of Bangladesh art. “Bangladeshi art is of international standard,” remarks Baseer, “but there are constraints. The state must play a greater role and patronise art; there should be a Shilpakala Academy in every district. There are many abandoned houses all over the country. They can be turned into venues for exhibitions. All creative work including art, moreover, should be made tax-free.”

Even after more than fifty years of creating a formidable repertoire of work, Baseer is far from being complacent. For Baseer, talent is an overstated word in art; it all boils down to sheer hard work, something this dynamic artist has never shied away from.

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Biriwala 1954 (Linocut)

decade for Baseer. In 1960, an exhibition of his paintings, drawings and lithographs was organised by the Pakistan Arts Council in Lahore. His second exhibition in Lahore displayed 28 of his works and were completely different from his



Bloody 21st 1952 (Linocut)

was concerned, he was reproducing actual parts of walls that looked abstract because they were devoid of figures. This is when Baseer came up with a new term to describe his work: abstract realism. The walls denoted barriers between people, the emotional