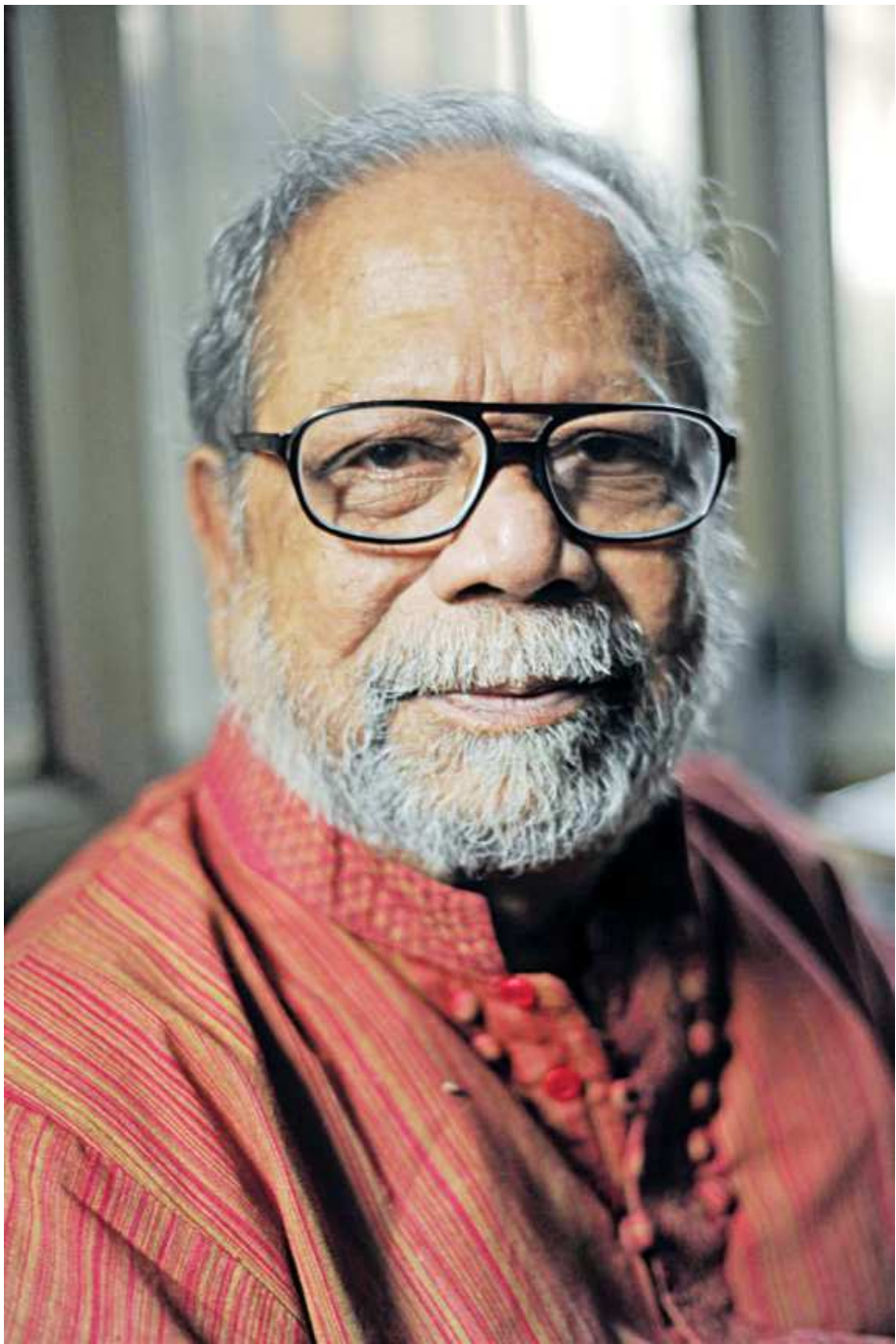


# “Murtaja Baseer’s passing is the end of an era”

– Abul Monsur

The recently deceased artist Murtaja Baseer created his famous series, *Epitaph for the Martyrs*, as a homage to the 1971 Freedom Fighters. The idea of the series struck him when he came across a small stone on the streets of Paris. In the pre-historic times, when a warrior died, a stone would be kept beside his head. The stone epitomised the soul. Inspired by the idea, Baseer started the 37-painting series in Paris, and completed it in Chittagong.



Murtaja Baseer

ZAHANGIR ALOM

Eminent artist Professor Abul Monsur, who was Murtaja Baseer’s colleague at Chittagong University, evaluated the creative legacy of the pioneering art maestro in a recent conversation with *The Daily Star*.

“I met him in the 60s. He was a pretty established artist in the then West Pakistan, back then. As my father was friends with Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin, I met many artists at our residence,” reminisced Abul Monsur. “I first saw him in 1968, while I was a student at the then Dacca Art College (now Faculty of Fine Art, University of Dhaka). When he came to his brother’s residence in Elephant Road, I accompanied with several students, went to see his drawings. Later, when I joined Chittagong University in 1974, he became my colleague. I had a 25-year long friendship with him.”

Apart from visual art, he wrote poems, short stories, novels and screenplays. He was an assistant director and art director of several films,” said Abul Monsur, citing Murtaja Baseer as an exceptional artist and a versatile genius. “An important researcher and numismatist, he studied and interpreted coins of the Bengal Sultan period with the scholarly commitment of a historian. An avid autograph collector, he would always love archiving stamps and match boxes.”

According to Monsur, Baseer was a dynamic personality, who would always remain absorbed in creative activities. Distinction was a trademark in his work. “He would regularly visit my residence. We had so many discussions on diverse issues, and opened my eyes on various aspects of art and made me learn about the painting styles, geometric forms and aesthetic values of early and pre-renaissance period artists like Giotto, Cimabue, Duccio, Simone Martini and Fra Angelico,” mentioned Abul Monsur.

Abul Monsur, who regards Baseer as a socially conscious artist, evaluates his literary genius as a self-centred poet, who is credited with writing several masterpieces, as short stories. “As a teacher, he was really good. He could see the potential of a student and guide him/her in the right direction. He never tried to

turn pupils into his followers. His creative perspectives and ever-changing mentality to adapt to new ideas was outstanding.”

Initially, Baseer had a charm for abstraction, but later he returned to his roots and depicted paintings, taking inspiration from folk art. “He was a second-batch student of Dacca Art College. There came several talented artists like Aminul Islam, Mohammad Kibria, Rashid Choudhury, Kazi Abdul Baset, Abdur Razzaque, Qayyum Chowdhury, Devdas Chakraborty and Syed Jahangir. His passing is the end of an era,” said Abul Monsur, who also talked about Murtaja Baseer creating mosaic artwork at Rajshahi University. The artwork reflects our conventional heritage of terracotta and



Abul Monsur

clay-burnt works. “This is an outstanding work by Baseer Bhai. Another of his finest works is installed in Bangladesh Bank. In my opinion he was a real master of drawings, comparable to Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin and Quamrul Hasan.”

Recollecting his fond memories with the maestro, Abul Monsur said that he would regularly walk with him. “Flowers like *Palash* and *Jarul* have a signature mark in the cityscape of Chittagong. He would share his aesthetic tastes and thoughts on adorning city streets like circuit house with *Palash* and *Jarul*. The Language Movement veteran wanted people to pay tributes to the martyrs on 21st February walking along the street of *Palash*. He had the eyes of a true artist. He would meticulously observe nature and all so curiously and closely,” concluded Abul Monsur.



Sayeeda Khanam at her own residence in February.

PHOTO: SHAHREAR KABIR HEEMEL

## The loving memory of SAYEEDA KHANAM

INTERVIEWED BY SHAHREAR KABIR HEEMEL ON FEBRUARY 29

The first female photographer of Bangladesh, Sayeeda Khanam breathed her last on August 18, 2020. As a photographer, her list of accomplishments is seemingly endless. Her journey as a photographer began even before she started working for *Begum*. Throughout her lifetime, she has captured numerous renowned people through the lens of her camera, including Mother Teresa, Satyajit Ray, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Queen Elizabeth II and even the first astronauts to step on the moon. She has represented Bangladesh in several international conferences, and brought home countless international awards. Besides her solo exhibitions, she has been a part of those held in France, Sweden, Japan, Pakistan, India and Cyprus. In this interview taken on February 29, she shared her thoughts and experiences as a photographer, while reminiscing about her childhood.

**Who inspired you to become a photographer?**

I was not inspired by any specific photographer. I would look at the photographs in local and foreign newspapers and try to understand how they were taken, paying special attention to the lights and shadows. Nowadays, photography has become much easier. Back then, we would have to solely rely on the sunlight. However, there was an element of excitement to that. I am lucky to have had the opportunity to meet many great people, and to have taken their pictures.

Siddiqua, introduced me to Mohammad Nasiruddin. He then asked me to take a few pictures for the cover and the content of *Begum*. I finally felt like I had found my place. Mohammad Nasiruddin was a very good man, and he constantly thought about female empowerment and progress. Following his thoughts and ideas, Nurjahan *apa* founded her own newspaper. We need more people like him in our society. I have only met a few men who empathize with women to such an extent. I believe that only the true idealists have realized the importance of empowering women. Women become mothers -- Without their empowerment, children cannot be fully educated either.

**Tell us about your childhood.**

As a child, I was physically quite weak. Because of that, I did not receive a lot

**Could you tell us more about your interaction with Satyajit Ray?**

Back then, S M Parvez was the editor of *Chitrali*. I contacted him and said that I wanted to photograph Satyajit Ray, after which I was informed that he was a very serious-natured individual and he usually refused to talk to anyone. While this disheartened me, my friends in Kolkata praised me for my courage. So, I decided to call, whereupon I was told to go to his house in Lake Temple in the evening two days later. On the day of the meeting, I went to his house and through the crack of a door, I saw him writing. I was nervous and did not know what to do! At that moment, he called out asking who I was, and I informed him that I was there from *Chitrali*. Afterwards, I asked him questions regarding his new movie, and the conversation flowed from there. He had



Sayeeda Khanam photographing Kazi Nazrul Islam in his last days.



From the time her sister gifted her a Rolleicord camera, Sayeeda Khanam knew photography was her true calling.

**You were the first female photographer in Bangladesh. How did you pursue your passion during that time?**

My family was very progressive. Otherwise, it would not have been possible. After seeing my interest in photography, my sister, Hamida Khanam (who was the founder and principal of the Home Economics College) bought me a Rolleicord camera. After the Independence War, when *Begum* was established in Dhaka, my aunt, poet Mahmuda Khatun

of pressure, in terms of studies. When my sisters would go to school, I would leave to play with other children. My grandfather would give me one taka every day, which was a significant amount of money back then. However, I would not buy anything with it. I would walk around the neighborhood. Sometimes, I would walk by Ichamati River. There was an abandoned house there and I would try looking inside through the broken windows. After my grandfather became ill, we moved to Visakhapatnam. We had a beautiful house by the sea there. Later, we moved to Rachi, where I was first enrolled in school. I was brought up in a unique environment -- Back then, there was no hatred between Hindus and Muslims in the community. They rather helped us in times of need. In the end, humanity is in kindness and sincerity.

**How does it feel to photograph celebrated individuals?**

I truly enjoy it. The process of taking pictures helps you to become acquainted with people and build connections with them. There are countless memories that I cherish to this day. Some of the highlights would be getting the opportunity to photograph Mother Teresa and Satyajit Ray. There are also a few tragic incidents and memories, but those are also a part of the journey. For the most part, I have received support and encouragement.

forbidden any press from his shooting site, but had given me the permission. It was such an honour!

**Do you still take photographs?**

Photography is my passion. Now, I photograph things that catch my eye; picturesque landscapes on my travels, people immersed in their work and daily activities, and so on. I enjoy it immensely.

**What are some things one should consider while taking a photograph?**

You have to be careful while photographing events and conferences, since they are usually crowded. However, I have always received support from my fellow photographers. Taking portraits are quite difficult as well, as the personality of the person has to shine as brightly as the face itself. Movements and protests can also be challenging to capture, and I myself have not photographed many of those.

**As an artiste, how much did winning awards inspire you?**

Receiving awards is always pleasant. It provides me the confidence and inspiration to continue working. However, I think about the country alongside my own growth as well. Like my other family members, I possess a deep love for my country and wished to do something for it. Respect and recognition are appreciated, but receiving love from others is what truly matters.



(L) Sayeeda Khanam’s first snapshot of Satyajit Ray at his home in Kolkata, in 1962. (R) Sayeeda Khanam was awarded the Ekushey Padak in 2019.