

# WEEKEND MAGAZINE

THE works of Jasimuddin, Zainul Abedin and S.M. Sultan are very much of and about Bangladesh. They carry the real artistic essence of the country's art and life. All the great artists are unique. This is notwithstanding the fact that they are nurtured by past traditions and are often imperceptibly influenced by national and international heritage.

The works of painter S.M. Sultan are portrayal of extraordinarily robust men and women set in the background of rural Bangladesh. They appear as opposite of what we see in reality. Sultan's uniqueness lies in the feeling and power expressed in his portrayal of the human form. His peasants depict strength of the body and mind, as if the figures are the outward manifestation of the inner strength and beauty of their labour. His peasantry stands as a glorious symbol of invincible man.

Sultan was born on August 10, 1923, in Narail, a Southwestern village of Bangladesh. His was a farmer family, but his father Sheikh Messer was a mason by profession. Sultan's former schooling started at Narail Victoria Collegiate School in 1928, which continued for five years. He even joined his father as an assistant in masonry work. Dr. Dharendra Nath Roy, an art loving zamindar, became a patron of Sultan's work.

Professor Shahed Suhrawardy, a great art-critic of that time, was then a member of the governing body of the Calcutta Art School. Sultan was like his adopted son and Dr. Suhrawardy met all the expenses for Sultan's education

## THE PAINTER OF PEASANTRY

by Rahat Fahrida

Many connoisseurs are struck by the tremendous rhythm and movement and the overtones of joy and excitement in the works of S.M. Sultan, the ascetic painter, whose own life-style arouses as much curiosity about himself as his paintings.

in the Art School. He was admitted to Calcutta Art School in 1941, although he lacked requisite qualification.

S. M. Sultan started a career in Calcutta as a free lance painter, mainly doing portraits and landscapes. Then his first phase of painting exhibitions were from 1945-1950. In 1951, he went to Karachi and worked as an art teacher in the Parsee school for two years. Later in 1953, he was back to the then East Pakistan and he settled in Narail, his place of birth, his sweet home.

During the years between 1945-1953, Sultan widely travelled around the world with his works extensively appreciated. His painting exhibitions were held not only in India and Pakistan, but in London and United States, too.

After coming back to his village, he established three schools, one primary, one high school and the other a fine art school. Sultan established Kuriygram Fine Art Institute in 1965 at Narail Sadar. Another art institute was established by him in Jessore town in 1973, which is presently renamed 'Charupet'.

During an interview with The Daily Star, Sultan was asked, "How did you feel coming back home in 1953 after so many years abroad?" Thinking down his memory lane he answered, "It was like being embraced by dear ones. My close friends welcomed me with all



S. M. Sultan. Self-portrait

the warmth. I wanted to forget about all the name and fame that I had earned abroad. I didn't want to bring any of those so-called achievement back with me to my village. When I met my old friends, I felt as if I had gone back to my childhood. As I got more involved in my village, I began to get close to the peasants as well. Then I felt myself undergo a deep transformation. I rediscovered myself. All the

alien ways of behaving and thinking that I had picked up in Europe were left behind. I was in tune with the people of my village. This transformation gave me deep feelings of peace and contentment."

From 1954, until early seventies, Sultan chose a solitary life far away from human habitation. He started living in the wilderness, sometimes in deserted old buildings, sometimes in dilapidated temples

and even under trees, sharing life with primitive surroundings. Sultan had never lived a family life, and was never involved in any amorous relationships. It has been only fifteen years back that a curious change took place in his personal life. "How is it that this Hindu widow, Nihar Bala Saha and her daughters play an important role in your life?"

Would you like to unveil their contribution?" Sultan's eyes lit up as he went on to say, "I never wanted to shoulder any responsibilities or entangle in any relationship. But this was a different story. Nihar Bala Saha, who is above 45 years old, wanted my help in the form of shelter to her and her two daughters, after the sudden death of her husband.

Initially, I suggested her to go back to her parents, I said that as I am a Muslim, our association would be socially a subject of great controversy. But she said weepingly, that for Hindu girls, their father's home is no longer theirs after the daughter is married. She must stay with her in-laws. But for her it was impossible. I explained my nomadic attitude towards life. I told Nihar and the daughters how economically unsure I was. I never really have urge for selling my paintings. But Nihar stayed on with me along with her two daughters, ignoring my unconcerned attitude to life.

"In the later years it has proved that I was able to live a normal life because of their care. Though people praise me as a benevolent person for giving them shelter, but I feel that it is the other way round. They have given me a shelter. They have thrown a new light into my life.

Nihar and the daughters take great interest in my paintings. They assist me when I make paints and my own canvas from indigenous materials. She even suggests some of the subjects for painting and expresses her views regarding the others.

"Nihar is undoubtedly a remarkable lady. Nihar has brought me back from self-exile. Their deep affection and care developed a new sense of responsibility and live in me. I am lucky that a great lady like her came into my life."

He has his eyes on all his company, he is tender towards the bashful, gentle towards the distant, and merciful towards the absurd. He guards against

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Group Ploughing II. Oil on canvas.

## A FILM-MAKER BY CHANCE



Director Tareque Masud on location during filming of 'The Inner Strength' (Adam Surat).

TAREQUE Masud, a Madrasah student in his childhood, is now one of the top names in the domain of our short films. Almost totally uninterested in films till his high school, a chance view of an American documentary on a psychiatrist amazed him and changed his views about films to a large extent. He had a different concept about films until that day. Hence, his career in film direction was more a fortunate accident than a planned pursuit. But certainly it geared up his instincts and brought forward his undiscovered talents.

Tareque started off by writing about films and on films. While still a student at the History Department of Dhaka University from where he completed both his B.A (Honours) and M.A., he started working on his idea of making short films.

"My first attempt is the film 'Inner Strength' (Adam Surat) based on painter S.M. Sultan's life. But before I could complete the film, I finished three others in between. One is 'Chains of Gold' (Sonar Bert), which is a 30-minute film fo-

cussing on women's condition and gender violence. The second one is 'Animation' (Gonotontro Mukti Pak), a 3-minute silent film, and the other is 'Ah America' which is a 30-minute film on the fantasy about the fast world. All films are in both English and Bengali versions."

It took Tareque Masud seven years to complete the film. This was partly due to financial constraints and partly because of S.M. Sultan's emotional conditions that the shooting was delayed.

Tareque Masud expressed that it was a difficult job to direct documentary films and frustrating too, as most of the audience have a negative attitude towards them. "It was much easier for me to do the three other films, says he, right now I am not planning for a film on any famous personalities."

Tareque is working ahead with another novel idea. His next production would be a full-length film based on his own childhood. 'The Inner Strength' had its premiere show at the Goethe Institute auditorium, recently. —R.F.

## A Marvel Called 'Inner Strength'

by Fayza Haq

THE film on S. M. Sultan, 'The Inner Strength', also called 'Adam Surat', in the Bangla version, written and directed by Tareque Masud, is a tremendous achievement. It captures for all time the artist Sultan's quest for self-expression and his dedication. This film, which took seven years in the making, because of unavoidable circumstances, has the suavity of any international production. When one hears of Bangladeshi film production one automatically conjures up the image of something patched together or loud, clumsy and gaudy. This film, on the other hand, is subtle, sensitive, artistic and full of information. If one compares it to the film on Bismillah Khan this is just as good, and at times, even better.

The film traces the early works of the 40's by Sultan which are all in oil. The docu-

mentary explains how during the first half of the decade he had the influence of various schools and trends. The influence of Van Gogh was particularly strong when he was living with the village people of

Tareque Masud. The film proceeds to tell us how after the mass movement of '69 and the consequential Liberation War of '71, Sultan's vision moved from the landscapes of nature and dwell on

A suave, sensitive film on S. M. Sultan that took 7 years in the making

Kashmir, the film tells us. His experimentation with other mediums such as charcoal, pastel, pen and ink, and the spatula technique are discussed.

The fact that the artist exorcised himself for the penchant for landscapes is also clearly recorded. Sultan's endless preoccupation with creating hundreds of water colours from this time to the mid 50's is carefully delineated by the script writer and director

human figures themselves. The director has done a marvellous job of highlighting the larger than life idealised figures of peasants, with their muscles speaking of their inner strength.

The storytelling highlights how the epic effect is enriched with mythical elements. The director concentrates on the fact how anthropological abstractions create the typical ethnic Bengali. The film stresses on the fact that the

peasants do not belong to any particular time. There are few who have been able to glorify the less than the lower middle class existence in the manner that Sultan has done, and the film focuses on this with tremendous expertise.

The film brings out the fact how for 50 years the artist has been continuously working on thousands of canvases without ever being prompted by the urge to sell. As he moves from place to place, he is shown as leaving samples of his work behind like indelible footsteps. It is then suddenly that the bourgeois intelligentsia, who ignored Sultan for years, begin to appreciate his work for its own selfish ends.

The film, while it explains Sultan's nomadic bachelor life, also dwells on how he eventually settles down with a widow and brings him out of his self-

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As noted Thai editor, Sutichai Yoon, once began one of his signed articles with a tongue-in-cheek introduction. After the first paragraph, he said something to this effect, "If you do not have much time for this piece, you can skip the rest of it, and read only the concluding paragraph."

Perhaps, this column, at least today, could have a similar introduction. There will be a lot of usual nostalgia, and perhaps too little modesty in this piece. There will be some name-dropping — luckily no photographs showing me shaking hands with famous figures — and glimpses from an unforgettable time, which might just make some of my young journalist-readers wonder why they do not get a chance of covering Asia, like the way some of us did in those days, to be exact, in the second half of the sixties.

So, if you feel that this is not the kind of column you would care to read in your favourite morning daily, turn to other pieces in the magazine, say, about the artist S. M. Sultan whose work and personality have fascinated me for over 30 years.

EVERY decade in Asia produces its own challenges and crises, hopes and dreams. It was no different in the second half of the sixties, when thanks to the Dawn and a couple of other publications, I was on the road a great deal, between Rangoon and Tokyo, through the arc of Southeast Asia, often ending up in places which I had never visited before and which, alas, I might never see again. However, in my recollection,

it is the sense of crisis of the time that comes in to my mental focus.

While India and Pakistan had fought their second war in 1965, the intense hostility between Indonesia and Malaysia, the escalation of the war in Vietnam, the heroic but abortive efforts by Prince Sihanouk to keep Cambodia out of the war, the growing communist insurgency in Laos and, above all, the overwhelming military presence of the United States, symbolised by the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and the American bases in Thailand and the Philippines had turned the whole region into a volcano that could erupt almost any time. It was the time when we talked of the Domino Theory, and assumed that the fall of any one country to communism would lead to the collapse of the whole area, like a house of cards.

In the midst of such a scenario stood a towering figure, President Sukarno. Presiding over a tottering economy and an uneasy political system of Indonesia, he was counting the days of a new revolution of the so-called new emerging forces. In this revolution of Sukarno's dream, the destruction of the Malaysian federation was to be only the beginning.

While inflation soared and the value of the Indonesian rupiah against all hard currencies dropped to all time low — one could fill a briefcase with local money after changing a couple of hundred US dollars at the unofficial rate — the Indonesian leader was apparently having the time of his life, often quoting a saying that

he attributed to Prophet Mohammad (S.A.S), "Let my people eat stones."

Sukarno did indeed have the time of his life and, quite literally, from his breakfast which he usually had in one of the balconies of his famous Merdeka Palace in Jakarta, in that pleasantly cool season when I spent a month in the Indonesian capital.

"No interviews with the President," the Information Minister Roslan Abdul Ghani had said, "but I will see that you join him for breakfast."

This is precisely what he did. There was no breakfast in the conventional sense of the term. The President was sitting on a cane chair, facing the green lawn, chatting away with about a dozen people, with several exquisite looking women dominating the group, occasionally sipping a cup of coffee. After a short introduction from the Information Minister, I was invited by the President to sit on a chair next to himself, which another guest had quickly vacated for me. In fact, this musical chair game went on, with every one getting a chance of sitting next to the President for a couple of minutes.

"My fight against Malaysia is a fight against imperialist forces," he said to me, "and it is a fight in which every progressive Asian country should join." I nodded, and he looked pleased. As if to show his approval, he said to Minister

## MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

Abdul Ghani — commanded would be a more appropriate word — to make sure that I had a long meeting with the Foreign Minister Subandrio. Then, Sukarno took no further interest in me. Any political discussion or even a question would have been totally out of place, almost irrelevant and an unwelcome intrusion. One interview that eventu-

Somewhere along the way, President Sukarno's vision of a new future, a future in which teeming millions in the region would live in peace and progress, started coming true, but within a new framework that had eluded the Indonesian leader.

ally made all the difference to my Indonesian assignment was not the talk with Subandrio but a long unexpected and hastily arranged meeting with D. N. Aidit, the head of the Communist Party of Indonesia, better known in history by its acronym, PKI. It seemed to me that after I had an audience with the President, no Indonesian leader, not even the Chairman of what was often described as the second largest communist party in the world — China topped the list, the Soviet Union came third

and Vietnam was the fourth — would keep his doors shut against me.

It was a good interview which gave me an insight into the communist dream for Indonesia, with all its contradictions, as well as an understanding, almost a liking, for a man who looked more a teacher in a provincial college than a hardened revolutionary

out in a jungle fighting a lost war (like Chin Peng of Malaysia). A year after my visit to Indonesia, the vast archipelago went through an abortive communist coup, the massacre of all leftist elements, the rise of General Suharto and the fall and death of Sukarno. In this order.

After the failure of the attempted communist coup — on this, there are now different versions — Dr Aidit was caught by the army and shot dead. A book on the communist

strategy in Indonesia quoted from my interview with Dr Aidit published in the Far Eastern Economic Review — Dawn would not have touched it — and described it as the last interview given by the Indonesian leader to a foreign correspondent.

In retrospect, it all seems rather sad — and a waste, Indonesia's policy of confrontation against Malaysia was all nonsense and Aidit's hope of turning this predominantly Muslim country into a communist state was way out of this world. Yet, there was something in that vision of Sukarno, the vision of giving the new emerging world — which sounds better than the Third World — a place on the global scene.

I spent a little time on my last evening in Jakarta with one diplomat who, by all accounts, loved Indonesia and understood President Sukarno. He was the Indian Ambassador, Apa Pant.

A good talker but a better listener — how many of our diplomats today would qualify for this distinction? — Mr Pant said at some point, "If you take the dreams of Nehru, Nasser and Sukarno separately, they may not make much sense. But if you take them together, one complementing the other, you have what we can only describe as the Asian — or rather Afro-Asian — vision."

COMPARED to my Indonesian assignment, my stopover in Manila produced a trivial experience.

There was no problem in getting an exclusive interview with the then President Diosdado Macapagal, the immediate predecessor of the late Ferdinand Marcos.

After a long wait in the corridor, I was finally admitted into the office of the President around seven in the evening, when he had answered a few preliminary questions on Jakarta-Kuala Lumpur conflict — Manila sought to be mediator — Mr Macapagal turned to his Foreign Minister, Salvador P. Lopez and suggested that he should give me a long interview. "However, instead of quoting Lopez, you can use the Foreign Minister's answers in my name," said Mr Macapagal. This suited me fine.

From Malacannang, we drove down to Padre Faura, the Foreign Ministry, where after a sandwich snack, we worked on the interview, the exclusive interview with President Macapagal, that got the front page treatment in the Dawn the following morning.

For next 15 years, Mr Lopez and myself saw a lot of each other as friends. After leaving the Foreign Office, SP, as he was called, became the President of the University of the Philippines and then headed a newly-created department in this prestigious institution for 'Studies into the Twenty First Century'. Then, when he had already reached 80, President Corason Aquino appointed SP as the country's Permanent Representative to

the United Nations, a position he probably still holds.

BY the time the decade had ended and we entered the seventies, many of the actors had disappeared from the Asian stage, making room for new players who were following a new script.

The confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia had ended. Once called the reluctant President, General Suharto had put the country back on the road to economic recovery — and progress that eventually made this archipelago one of the most resourceful countries of the region. The fatherly figure of Tunku Abdul Rahman made way for Tun Abdul Razak — both now dead — who, too, found his answer to the country's stagnation in the challenging but somewhat controversial New Economic Policy, while the neighbouring city state of Singapore was all set to give a new thrust towards a dynamic economic future for the island. And in Thailand, the shock of the gradual withdrawal of US troops was being absorbed and the country was getting all set to join the ranks of Newly Industrialised Countries (NICs).

Somewhere along the way, President Sukarno's vision of a new future, a future in which teeming millions in the region would live in peace and progress, started coming true, but within a new framework that had eluded the Indonesian leader. Sadly enough, in this framework, another vast region found no place — South Asia — and it remained — and still remains — at least a decade behind the great unfolding Asian drama of our time.