

CONVERSATION

Syed Shamsul Haq Reflects on Art, Literature, Life

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And virtually that has brought drama to a position to which it stands today.

My one complaint about theatre is that we have concentrated on the Mahila Samity too much. Dhaka is an expanding city. What about the old part of the city? What about Uttara? What about Mohammadpur? They cannot come to Mahila Samity with all the muggings in the streets and all the expenses of transport involved. A middle class person cannot afford to pay 50 takas for the scooter fare and then another 100 for the actual play.

I think that in Dhaka, there should be two theatre halls in the older parts, and two in the northern parts and two around the centre.

Then there is another thing. In old Dhaka, for instance in Nazirabazaar there is a gymnasium where people go for exercises in the evenings. If we can motivate the younger local boys, then that can be converted into an auditorium for staging of plays.

This has been done in Britain, where I once spent three months looking into small auditoriums which have been converted into drama theatres. This we can do, we can spread drama.

Between 1971 and 1985, there was great enthusiasm for drama and new creations were coming up. I took up writing plays in 1975, although I had been writing poetry and fiction since 1952.

However, since '85, it seems to me that we have declined in the field of theatre because we have remained concentrated on the Mahila Samity. Let me give you a parallel.

Titumir, one of our heroes about whom I'm writing a play, committed a big mistake. Instead of going to the countryside he concentrated on one fortress, and that's why he was finished off. Titumir's biggest political blunder was that he did not go out of his fort.

DS: He did not read Ho Chi Minh ...

SSH: Similarly, today when we stage plays at the Mahila Samity or at the Shilpakala Academies in rural towns, what we're doing is we're keeping it confined to the slightly upper middle class elites. We are not being able to reach the common people.

I spend at least five days in a month outside Dhaka, because I think the capital is an island. Real life lies outside Dhaka. So, this year I have taken up a project on people's theatre.

I am going to the people, talking to them, asking them to use a place for staging plays, see something that they can do. I have drawn up a list of subjects that they can write, and if they can show it to me then I'll give them time.

DS: We have reached a very interesting turning point, right? You have an overall assessment of what we have achieved and where we have failed. How do you see the future, and what would be your advice to writers, playwrights and film-makers about how they should go about?

SSH: There is an alternative film movement. They're working on 16mm format. I think they should adopt 35mm format and play on the other guy's turf. There is a necessity to show these films on the big screen.

OK, Satyajit Roy took a chance and believed his *Pather Panchali* would create a big stir in the country, he believed it.

I believe there are film-makers in this country with great ideas, but they do not have the financial resources.

Independent producers are no longer coming forward because of the higher risks now involved.

In earlier years, around 40 per cent of the movies released in a year could expect to make profits, while around seven per cent usually became superhits. At the other end of the scale, 20 per cent suffered minor losses, while 25 per cent met disasters at the box office.

Today however, Imam says, upto 50 per cent of the total number of movies released are likely to make heavy, crippling losses, while five per cent would make profits that were unimaginable only a few years back.

"Investment requirements are increasing everyday, but the rate of return is not keeping pace", Imam, a veteran of 150 films and producer-director of three full-length feature and 30 documentaries, says. "People are also not keen on opening new movie halls because owners are not sure of getting adequate returns on the big initial investment necessary."

But I also believe that there are people with money in this country who love this country. If they help this alternative film movement in any way, then I'd be very happy.

In the fields of plays, I think we should go for people's theatres, we should go for open-air theatres and involve 85 per cent people of the land, and not confine it to the elites of Dhaka or Chittagong, Mahila Samity here or Shilpakala Academy there.

In literature, I think we need to widen the subjects. We've entered a very narrow and confined field. I do realise that because of the historical period we are going through, it is not always possible for us to have the right perspective. But I think, as creative people, we have to look far ahead.

A creative person must

when they are perhaps drawing something that is Bengali.

Now you can ask if it is wrong to borrow or assimilate from outside? No, it is not. Today when I write poetry, I'm influenced by T S Eliot, I'm influenced by Ezra Pound, by Octavio Paz, by Pablo Neruda. However, I'm assimilating these influences in my own way. You have to take the influence from within, but most of our painters are adopting it from outside.

DS: Is there a particular thing we are lacking badly in the field of art and literature, apart from the general side?

SSH: I feel particularly the absence of a serious literary journal. There are politically-oriented popular weeklies like *Bichitra*, there isn't any liter-

one way or other, affiliated directly or indirectly with one political party or another.

So, I don't think the writers' guild you mentioned is possible in this country. One of the major problems is that we are too fragmented. People in one district don't know anything about another district. If you, for instance, ask people in Barisal about what is going on in Rangpur, 99.99 per cent would not be able to tell you. Responsibility for this fragmentation lies on journalists as well as on writers.

This fragmentation of the country was initiated by the martial law regime which was imposed on Bangladesh in 1958.

Then Pakistani military rulers said, Islam was in danger. A K Fazlul Huq was a traitor, Suhrawardy and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman were not good men etc.

They started the process of fragmenting this country so that people could not come together on an issue.

Today, it is difficult to unite people on a common cause. On Eid-ul-Fitr day in Sathkira, the Imam started his munaajat by seeking freedom for Golam Azam. Ten thousand devotees put their hands down and demanded that the Imam should apologise for his comment. The Imam was forced to apologise and somebody else took over the conduct of the munaajat. Now, this should have happened all over Bangladesh.

Today, the biggest duty in front of us, as writers, journalists, political workers and whoever loves this country, is to work to unite the entire country mentally.

DS: We have talked about fragmentation of writers, fragmentation of the society. Do all these things reflect what you might call a crisis in our values and standards from which we may take a long time to recover?

SSH: I could not agree with you more. Now, it is our responsibility, yours and mine, to explain why we are a nation. But I'm not talking about ultra nationalism when I talk about the nation. I'm saying, why are we a nation.

By nation I mean a set of symbols which make culture.

**'We often make a mistake by confusing between sculpture and idols. When people destroy works of sculpture, they think they are breaking idols ... but sculpture is not an idol, it's a creative expression'**

think and have a long-term view. He has to cultivate human values in his work. If you cannot cultivate human values, then you won't get what you wanted, like a Razakar-free country, a free Bangladesh, because there won't be any humans there, because the essential human qualities won't be there. With four decades of work behind me and with all my humbleness, this what I feel about literature.

Now, there are two sides to painting, that is painting and sculpture. We often make a mistake by confusing between sculpture and idols.

People lack a clear understanding about these two in this country. When people destroy works of sculpture, they think they are breaking idols

acy magazine like *Chaturanga* for instance or *Samakal*. Nobody is doing anything like that these days. I don't know if this is so because of a lack of financial viability.

But I feel there is a great need for a journal like that today, and I repeat, there is a need for a literary magazine today.

Otherwise, we don't have a place to write. Where do we now write? We write in the special supplements of daily newspapers, but as you know, daily newspapers have a lifespan of one day. People would pick it up and say, 'oh I see, there is a short story by Syed Shamsul Haq, yes, OK', then he read one para of that story and turn the page to news, read a bit about Rohingyas, a



Commercial films have their own marketing vehicles, but art films lack even those.

because Islam does not permit making of idols.

But a sculpture is not an idol, it is a creative expression. This is one thing I think art critics and the artists themselves should talk about. They should make it absolutely clear that a piece of sculpture is sculpture and an idol is idol. I have nothing to do with idols.

What's happened with our painters is that they are imitating the West rather too much. Techniques, treatment of subjects, even subjects. Of course, by West I mean Europe America, Australia etc.

If you go to any painting exhibition, you will hardly find any Bengali cultural element. Now you can ask how Bengali cultural element comes into painting.

We did not start painting only after the British came here. We have been drawing since the time of the Pals (mid-8th century to 13th century).

The Pal era is one of our great periods of painting, with thick contour lines, the use of brick red.

We have been painting since then.

Now I'm not saying that we have to imitate that, because every medium has its own moment, and you have to use it within the context of the time, and say what you've got to say.

But there has to be a continuity.

But what most of the younger painters have done, I find, is they have adopted the European and American techniques of execution, even

little of Khaleda Zia and that's it. Finished. Forget it.

However, I want journals like *Chaturanga*, *Parichal*, *Purbasha*, *Kavitar Patrika* of Buddhadev Basu, *Shaugat*, *Samakal*, even *Sanibarar Chitrit*.

Now the Bangla Academy publishes a magazine called *Uttaradhikar*, which is badly planned and badly edited. Yet Bangla Academy has the money, it has a press, it has offices and staff, why they are not able to produce a good literary journal. I do not know.

DS: Have you ever thought of setting up something like a writers' guild? Or do you fear that it might get confused with what Ayub Khan set up?

SSH: No. Several years ago, perhaps six or seven years ago, around 100 writers with various political beliefs — Awami League, Communist Party, pro-Moscow, pro-China, NAP, whatever, but independent — we came together and formed a Lekha Union. I was very surprised that I was elected the president.

However, after one year we had a convention, then, most unfortunately, fighting began among those who were politically-oriented. In the process, I, who was not connected to any political party, left the organisation.

Now I do not believe in unions, because there are several unions and they are all politically-oriented. I won't name names, but there are three or four unions and they are all in

Bangladesh is very fortunate that at least 97 per cent of the people speak one language, and when our Prime Minister addresses the nation, everybody understands, unlike India or Pakistan or even China. We have this favourable condition, but somehow we cannot make use of it. There is no parallel to this homogeneity in other parts of this subcontinent. But we can't use this power.

DS: We have all the advantages yet we seem to invent reasons to fight one another ...

SSH: There is one thing I'd like to add, and it is that we are becoming more and more intolerant. Not only among common people, but also among writers, cultural people, academicians, there is intolerance. I don't know what the remedy is, but I think it is on the rise. It is the fragmentation of the country and the rising intolerance that worries me.

DS: Thank you, Mr. Haq, for your time.

SSH: Thank you all. If I may say Mr. Ali, it was a particular pleasure to talk at length with you after such a long time. I think it was nearly three decades ago that I spoke to you on the Press Club verandah.

Since then friends have been getting fewer and fewer. I have lost many friends in 1971, while others went over to the other side in recent years.

'Celebration's Secular Blend Unites Our Spirits'

DAILY STAR: We have been celebrating the Bengali New Year for a number of years now. What kind of impact do you think it has had on our political consciousness as a distinct cultural entity?

BORHANUDDIN KHAN JAHANGIR: The celebration of Bengali New Year is the most secular ritual in which we participate. This is class transcendent, gender transcendent and religion transcendent.

In every community there is scope for both religious and secular festivals. We need both types of festivals and the Bengali New Year celebration is one of the fundamental festivals of our society. It is also very widely participated merchants on this occasion celebrate *halkhata*, villages celebrate *nabanna*, and every one else in some way celebrate the day. The celebration's secular blend unites our spirits.

DS: Do you think celebration of Bengali New Year played any role in the socio-political movements of the country between 1947 and 1971?

BKJ: Yes, indeed, Bengali year did play a vital role in shaping our socio-political consciousness.

We fought against Pakistan in the name of Bengali society against Pakistani state, and that's a struggle generated by the spirit of our culture. That was primarily the essence of

DR. BORHANUDDIN KHAN JAHANGIR, a Professor at the Department of Political Science of the University of Dhaka talks to Sharier Khan of the Daily Star about the socio-political significance of the Bengali New Year, and the role it could play in the struggle against communalism and religious fundamentalism.

politics generated from 1947 and onwards.

DS: How much of a threat do communalism and religious fundamentalism pose to our cultural identity as Bengalees?

BKJ: I do believe that communalism is still a threat. And the fundamentalists are using the historicity of communal problems of the subcontinent to further the narrow communal politics.

Attacks on Hindu temples in Dhaka during the Ershad regime is one of the examples of fundamentalist's politics. The fundamentalists are trying to establish their idea of democracy, which is completely communal, in our country. They are trying to say that as majority of the country are Muslims, we should follow a communal rule.

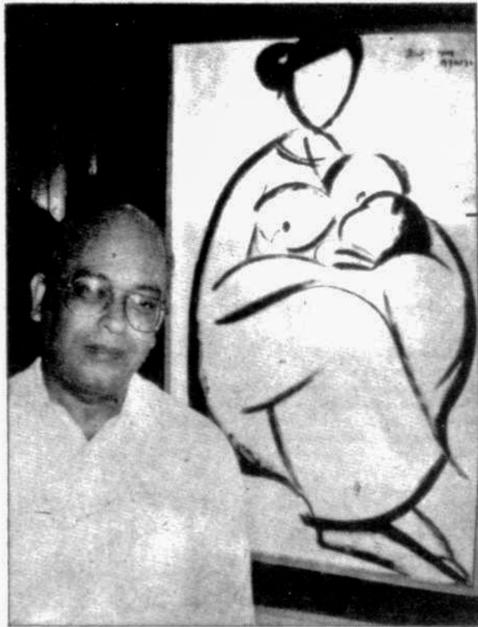
Is it a democratic idea? No. Democracy does not permit communalism. If it were a precondition of democracy then nowhere in the world would

the minority have had a place.

Communalism is a threat against the base of a society. We must always remember that following a religious path is not fundamentalism. Likewise Islamism is not fundamentalism, and the latter has its own character in every society.

DS: What kind of a role could celebration of the Bengali New Year play in fighting communalism and fundamentalism?

The critic and his art: Prof. B.K. Jahangir stands in front of a Quamrul Hassan creation, depicting Bengali motherhood with a few, brilliant flourishes of the brush.



directors and technical hands for making commercial, entertainment films, in a reversal of the trend of two or three decades ago.

"However, we are still lagging far behind West Bengal as far as films with artistic values are concerned", Imam adds, saying that the switch by the middle-class to television and video has greatly affected the market for art films in Bangladesh.

The video has also had a negative impact on the film society movement, because it has enabled middle income households to hire and watch high-quality Western and Hindi action films at home, says Imam who was the founder-president of the Federation of Film Societies.

The Societies, by screening top-range foreign films, "tried to cultivate an audience for films with artistic values", until video put a damper on it.

But the experience has not been without benefit, particularly as exposure to high quality foreign films "created an urge among Film Society members to make art films".

The cost factor, however, was found to be prohibitive for full-length feature films that could be shown on the big movie hall screens.

With only a small market and no government subsidy, "creative people began to make art films in 16mm format".

"This is a parallel movement, which is not possible in the full-length mainstream market", explains Imam, who won a national award for Best Actor for his role in *Basundhara*, adding that financial assistance from government or private sources is essential to enable art film directors to make full-length films on 35mm format.

The continued growth over the decades of commercial films has had a tremendous impact on the popular culture of the country. Cinema has influenced Jatra and other forms of rural culture, which in turn has inspired cinema in its own way.

The more urbanised, educated, elite culture of the country has, however, remained somewhat aloof from the impact of cinema, being more attracted to video. The existence of a more forceful alternative, art film culture, like that of Calcutta, could have made a difference. Without adequate financial resources, that is yet to be the case.

This perhaps explains why cinema, unlike theatre, poetry or music, has played such a peripheral role in the momentous socio-political movements

BKJ: If we participate meaningfully in the celebration, we could construct a different meaning of culture. That construction would be a happier culture. We must broaden the scope for wider participation. Thus feeling of all differences would change.

We can make it happen by simple nurturing a progressive culture.

DS: As an art critic, do you think the New Year celebration is providing scopes for better artistic creativity?

BKJ: Of course! Every ritual is a basis for development of art and culture. And we need this sort of infrastructure. Every year we are getting diverse artistic works from the celebrations of Bengali New Year, and that is very much needed too.

The Film Industry in Bangladesh

Commercial Movies Facing Hard Times

Award-winning actor-director-producer SYED HASAN IMAM talks to Sabir Mustafa of the Daily Star, about the crisis facing the country's premier medium of entertainment, both in the commercial and artistic strands:



Syed Hasan Imam

However, the dramatic increase in the urban population since the mid-70s coupled with the arrival of video players and Hindi films from Bombay had a major impact, forcing a change in the format of movie-making in this country.

The impact, although dispiriting to those with aesthetic tastes, has not been without positive aspects. The movement towards action films and crime thrillers has, Imam says, resulted in vast improvements in the technical standards of movie making in Bangladesh.

"Commercial film-making has improved a great deal since liberation, particularly in technical areas such as camera work, editing and in the field of direction", Hasan Imam, two of whose own films — *Lalan Fakir* and *Lal Shabuj Pala* — won national cine-journalists awards, explains.

Imam believes that the standard of commercial film-making in Bangladesh has moved ahead at a faster rate than that of neighbouring West Bengal because, "as we had no great burden of tradition like West Bengal, we were able to modernise and move ahead faster".

As a result, Imam continues, West Bengal producers are now coming to Dhaka to hire

Enter folk. The steadily increasing migration of people from the countryside to urban areas, particularly Dhaka, provided an expanding market for folk stories. The newcomers, to whom Jatra used to be the highest form of entertainment, found the folk movies tailor-made. It was a happy mar-

currently a producer-director of documentaries and distributor of and actor in full-length commercial films, Hasan Imam feels many gen-