

Fish Fry and the Future of Painting

by S. Bari

A piece of fried fish was one of painter Shahabuddin's stepping stones to fame. When the owner of a prestigious art gallery in Paris asked to see some sketches, Shahabuddin worked feverishly for a month in his atelier. The sketches would be taped to the walls and I would contemplate them while cooking," he muses. Oil from frying spattered the pieces on the wall. The gallery owner was enthralled: "How did you manage to make these perfect little spots?" he wondered. Shahabuddin never told him about the Bengali painter and his *maachh bhaja*.

Shahabuddin has lived in Paris for the last 18 years. What is a Bangladeshi painter in Paris - can he still be Bangladeshi? He puts a hand to a shock of very black, very dishevelled hair and smiles his face-creasing disarming smile. "I am only what I am today because of Bangladesh. If Bangladesh had not been created I would have been a painter, sure, but the Independence movement and me being a *muktijoddha* gave me a certain power. What I saw and learnt is a *masala*, a flavour that I try to use in my work."

That much is obvious from Shahabuddin's exhibition at Shilpangan. On the wall facing the entrance a *muktijoddha* runs exultant, a flag streaming over his head: "Victory." Several portraits of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman hang on the other walls. All share that peculiar Shahabuddin melange of Renaissance boldness of muscle and skin and Impressionistic smudginess.

"I have always been fascinated by motion. Look at 'Pather Panchali'. Remember where the children go to see the train and the flag bends in the wind? That is fluidity. Ray takes the music and the movement and makes art," Shahabuddin explains.

Even when Shahabuddin's subject itself is not moving (which is rare), the strokes that create the subject are. Muted colours, blended to form shadow and light, hint at figures, never explicitly delineate them. In "Yes," a man reaches up towards a diffused source of light, his body a mere suggestion of brushstrokes, except for one clear, strong thigh with muscles rippling.

Incidentally, this is the painter's favorite in this collection. He likes the softness of the light, the space, and the contrast of a vigorous body. "I see in it the myth of Proteus," he says, "a hero for mankind."

Shahabuddin likes heroes. A number of Bangabandhu portraits, a Rabindranath, and a Mahatma Gandhi grace this exhibition. In his studio high atop a Kalabagan apartment building, he explains why: "We need heroes. Bangabandhu, Gandhi, they made their mistakes, they paid for them, but we cannot forget that they



Shahabuddin, an artist shaped in the fires of the War.



"Yes", an eternal rejoicing, the primal human.



"Chitro", welcome to a new generation.

were essential to their country. People like Maulana Bhashani, like Bangabandhu, can you imagine anyone of that stature today? Anyone capable of making those sacrifices? We have no leaders today. The media can try all it wants, you can't make today's small politicians into real leaders."

The painter's obsession with Bangabandhu is more personal, more specific. He has drawn Mujib so many times, this is the only face I can paint completely from memory, without having to consult a photograph. As a *muktijoddha*, he feels Bangabandhu was his inspiration. Among the several portraits of the assassinated president, one indicates clearly the independence speech of 7th March 1971. There is an elation in this painting that fades sharply when you move to another portrait, where the leader's face is contorted with pain and grief. "No, this is not the moment of assassination," the painter says quietly, "but rather an amalgam of the frustration of his last days. I see myself, my pain and disappointment with the nation in this picture."

Shahabuddin was not always so politically aware. "My whole family was politicized but I was in my own world. Then I was told Awami League was looking for artists." Then an Art College student, Shahabuddin

was overwhelmed by the respect the party members had for his art. He agreed to illustrate some slogans. One was *Tonar amaar thikana, Padma Meghna Jansuna*. Another was a slogan that captured his imagination and changed his artistic thinking forever: *Jay Bangla*.

"I was enchanted by those words," he remembers wistfully. The house was a hotbed of political activity by then. Shahabuddin was caught up in the Liberation movement. After fellow student Asad was killed, "the other art students became involved as well. I still remember a procession carrying Asad's body, with thousands of angry students. It looked like *qayamat* was coming."

Shahabuddin never stopped painting, except for his months at the War. "I paint every day, especially in the mornings. If I can't find a subject I paint the door, the window, the bricks in the wall. The moment of putting brush to bare paper is often wrenchingly painful, you don't know what is going to come out. It's paid off - literally. A genuine Shahabuddin bags Taka 1.5 lakhs these days."

It's a long way from his beginnings, when his parents, aggravated by his constant doodling and inattention to his studies, would spank him in despair. When he was in his early teens his mother gave up

Painter Shahabuddin has been a representative of Bangladesh's artistic heritage in France for nearly two decades. He returns and exhibits in his native country regularly. During his latest visit, he talks about the shaping forces of his art and what it means to be a Bangladeshi artist.



"Victory", possibly the best painting to emerge from the womb of Liberation.

and enrolled him in art classes. "She went herself in a rickshaw to enquire," he recalls fondly. "I had classes every Sunday and Friday. Frightened and intimidated by the posh students, he was slow to take to it. They spoke Urdu and came in cars. I had this huge complex!" But the teachers were understanding, and soon Shahabuddin lived only for Fridays and Sundays.

Then came National Children's Day and a competition. The budding artist didn't tell his family about his entry. "I was so nervous," he laughs,

"I remember the palpitation. Sarkar Kabiruddin was reading the news. He announced my name as winner of the teenage category. We were all sitting at the breakfast table, Abba, Amma, eight brothers and sisters. I jumped on to the table for joy."

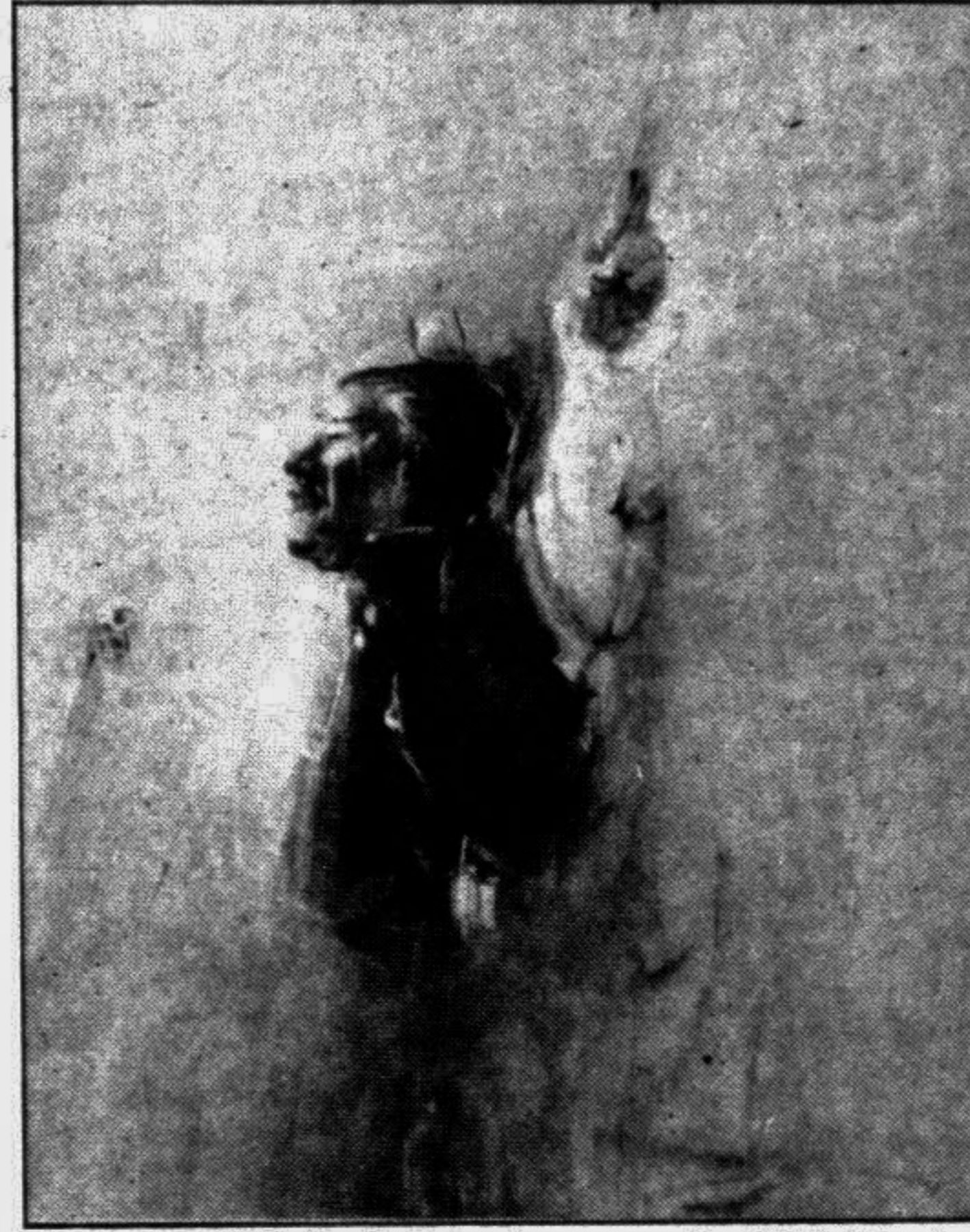
All the young Shahabuddin wanted was to be another Zainul Abedin. After graduating from Art College he left for Paris on a scholarship. "I began to suffocate; I didn't belong there." He recalls a period of intense mental agony, when "I didn't know what I was sup-

posed to be." Years later, at 42, he can analyse this phase candidly. A French art patron exposed his problem: "You have had too much success too soon." Shahabuddin believes now that the acclaim in Bangladesh had gone to his head. In France his paintings sold well, but as tourist trinkets, not for their art value. "I was merely exotic, not as good as I had been led to think," he winces with distaste.

By 1979, Shahabuddin had found his motion - and art idea, and he had come to understand that the War was his

defining experience. He believes that the struggle for Independence has not even begun to yield its artistic harvest. "You see, there is not a single really good film on the subject, yet it's a perfect subject." He himself, he feels, finally learned in Paris what the War meant to his art. His work reached adulthood.

"There was this gallery where Picasso and Cezanne had been shown. I had vowed I would show there before I left. And I did, but only for a day." During the first day, Shahabuddin saw a man pushing



"Bangabandhu" the Independence speech of 7th March 1971.

away with his foot one of the rolled up sketches lying on the floor. Looking coldly at the man, Shahabuddin pointedly moved the roll away. The next day, his paintings were off the wall. The man had been the gallery owner's boyfriend. Shahabuddin is still tickled by the memory.

His career took off when a mysterious buyer showed up on his doorstep and offered to purchase his work. Still angry over the previous fiasco, Shahabuddin deliberately quoted a price ridiculously high for a complete unknown. The man promptly paid the 8000 francs. He turned out to be Pierre Parrot, one of France's most illustrious architects and designer of a new gallery. He wanted to exhibit Shahabuddin's paintings, and suddenly all of Paris knew there was a young firebrand Bengali in town.

"I am a Bangladeshi artist because of many things. In Europe, my work is so obviously not European. No European could paint what I do. My use of space is indefinite, it could be on ground, you can't really tell." This avoidance of precision is Eastern, Shahabuddin believes. Living closer to the land, the Bengali's perception of indoor and outdoor is blurred.

The way an artist portrays violence is also a clue to his ethnicity, according to the reticent painter. "There is a mechanical, urban violence in most western painting. But I paint a violence that is more personal, not a general violence against humanity. Perhaps because I am Bengali and my experience of violence is circumscribed by the War, my painting is of a different tone."

But to the gallery visitor, Shahabuddin does not seem to paint violence so much as speed and extremes of emotion. Every piece in this exhibition paints a burst - of tears, of anger, of speed, of rejoicing, of effort. Only "Bathing" slides off into a corner, with a slower kind of sensuality. A telling statistic: "Bathing" is the only painting of a woman in the whole collection."

Never has Bangladesh art held so much action in brushstrokes of oil on canvas. Gone are the insipid boats and forced modernity of so much of our art. This exhibition points to the future. Perhaps symbolising this future, in "Chitro", a man's stretched arms hold aloft a newborn. Welcome to a new generation.

Some Impressions of Bangladesh of Visitors from Down Under

by Fayza Haq

ingenious way in which people make a living. Whenever a bus stops, there are people trying to sell. Few takas is the incentive that they have to make a living. They don't peddle their wares for nothing, they are trying to make a living.

Clare Kenwood, the personnel manager of Ford Motor Company, Victoria, giving her impressions of our country, said, "I had been looking at the people in Bangladesh, and I'm pleased to see women in prominent positions. I believe that Bangladesh has a lot of skilled women, who could be utilised more to educate the masses, and to educate the children at home, in subjects like home-economics, and other fields of education. In general they can improve the literacy rate of the country."

She added, "One of the most striking things that I've found here is the poverty. People here are so accustomed

to seeing it, yet even in six weeks we have not been able to stop ourselves from being shocked. I think, however, that the people who live in the villages and the poor parts of the city, are extremely resourceful, as they utilise the items which would be considered rubbish overseas, such as coca-cola bottles which they use as lampstands for lighting their homes. In the wealthier families, I believe that there is often a lot of wastage of food which, if given to the starving masses outside, could be better utilised."

Clare proceeded to say, "he things that give hope in the country, I believe, are probably institutions like the UNICEF, the NGOs, and institutions such as "the Rotary". People outside are ready to help but I think that the Bangladeshi politicians should make more efforts to obtain aid from outside to put their money in Bangladesh. I was pleased to see, however, how the garment industry was employing more women, providing export opportunities, which was a very positive thing to see."

She added, "I'm also impressed with the fact that you are concerned about employment opportunities. You train people to sew and stitch, which we might use machines for. Some of the things that we would say about Bangladesh, would be critical, but we can be critical about our own country too, despite the fact that Australia is a more sophisticated place. Thus people across the world are the same and face similar problems, though some suffer differently."

Viki Cullinan, working at a newspaper advertising at

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Warragul, Victoria, comparing farming in Bangladesh with that in her country said, "Our farming is much more advanced than that in Bangladesh, because we have readily available equipment; due to the different technology we use; and the help our farmers are given in the form of advice from different government organisations."

She added, about her impressions of Bangladesh, "Your way of life is so different from us. We've had trouble in adjusting to the food as everything in Australia is usually bland. Your traffic was another element which we found overwhelming, as the traffic back home is very regimented. We don't honk our horns, for instance, all the time; and similarly, we do not have to face rickshaws and pushcarts."

Peta Maidens, a forest manager from Yaram, South Gippsland, Victoria, giving her opinion of Bangladesh said, "I was impressed by your road transport and your ability to transport 50% more people in 50% less vehicles. The rates of accidents are not that much, keeping in mind the number of people on the roads."

Peta added, "We were impressed by the flood management. Our fields in Australia are flattened. People here are environmentally aware, by the way they make their fields smaller, and by raising the land between them. Bangladeshis will hopefully deal with the water in an efficient way. The irrigation here is very interesting. One could provide run offs. We ourselves use a lot of top soil in seeping out water on the small fields."

Lindy Colman, a community nurse from Mornington Peninsula, Victoria, giving her comments about our country said, "I admired the ability of the people to be able to smile after all the problems that Bangladesh faces. It seems that there are scars on the faces and minds of many individuals, but they are still optimistic. There are children running around the streets, with no clothes on, who are undernourished, and yet they too appear cheerful."

She added, "The doctors in Bangladesh have the ability, as

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Standing in the middle Steve P Mery with local Rotarians. Sitting from left to right are: Clare Kenwood, Lindy Colman, Peta Maidens, Vicki Cullinan and Cate Evans.



"Bathing" is the only slowly sensual painting in the collection, and also the only woman.