

# S M Sultan — A Giant among Artists

**S**HEIKH Muhammad Sultan (with the pet-name 'Lal Mia') was called the 'Voice of Asia' by Peter Sewitz, the Director of Goethe Institut, in '87. Undoubtedly, there could not have been a more apt term for S M Sultan, whose works were influenced by memories and training of universal giants in the sphere of fine art, in both the Subcontinent and Europe. S M Sultan, who passed away on 10th October '94, should be recognised as a nonpareil national hero of Bangladesh.

His works were there to be examined, adapted and admired by not only the connoisseurs, the selected few from the upper echelons of both the local and foreign society of Bangladesh, but the lovers of art (as a single entity). This was when the Shilpakala Academy, through Subir Choudhury's ceaseless efforts, held a second exhibition of S M Sultan's works, selected from those that were available from the collections of private individuals and galleries.

I cannot claim to know S M Sultan personally, beyond fleeting glimpses of him, such as when his first solo exhibition was held at the Shilpakala Academy (when Mao Zedong died, decades back), and at occasions, such as those held recently, at the Goethe Institut, when he was no longer the introvert but obviously intelligent person, with ringlets flowing down his shoulders, and clad in a monk-like, jet-black garment, which appeared like some mystery one longed to decipher and discover. The last time I had the privilege to see him, he carried a cane, but his bearing was dignified and overawing.

It is surely an irreparable loss, for neither I nor any other art-lover will ever have the opportunity to have such a genius amongst us, today. As I had the chance to see a superb film on S M Sultan, at the Goethe Institut, in the spring of '92, I learnt of the life and works of S M Sultan. As a consequence, I believe that my appraisal of the maestro is an adequate one. While Zainul Abedin has always had the title 'Shilpakarya' in Bangladesh (and I have personally seen him being compelled to do pale imitations of his own dynamic sketches, as made-to-order oil-on canvas pieces at Karachi, Pakistan), I fail to comprehend why the Government of Bangladesh felt it sufficient to grant S M Sultan only the rank of a 'resident painter' and a 'life pensioner' of the Shilpakala Academy. I believe he surely deserved more than this.

Sultan's works had been compared to the well-known ones of Pieter Bruegel ('Harvesters') and Vincent van Gogh ('Potato-Eaters') by Mohitaram of Old-Dhaka in '87. Similarly, his works had been put on par with those of Jasmuddin by Abdur Razzaque, the well-known local Fine Arts Professor. Shamsur Rahman, the renowned poet, had paralleled his farmers and fishermen (of both genders) to the

world-famous works of the European Renaissance artists.

Meanwhile, Al-Mahmud, another major poet, had rightly enough praised his works for their originality, exquisite delineation, spontaneity and unparalleled compositions. Sadeq Khan, in his introduction to the book 'Nine Modern Artists' in '93 had admired him profusely for his sensitivity and finesse.

Sultan's best known work is perhaps the oil-on-canvas 'Prothom Brikharapon,' which delineates Adam (perhaps symbolising all mankind) planting a sapling, today, with the pollution of environment, after the two great World Wars, the Cold War, the Gulf War, and the intermittent conflicts in the Middle East, we realise how far-sighted the artist had been. This is due to the fact

that our flora and fauna has been repeatedly destroyed, despite the constant efforts and advice of agricultural experts, for at least as far back as 3000 BC, we still require the nurturing of all living creatures, both terrestrial and aquatic.

The artist's depiction of man is done with exaggerated muscles of the body and limbs, as has always been the painter's style, to accentuate the unceasing toil. The exaggerated facial hair and the carelessly tossed 'plumage', and most importantly, the weary hunched pose, along with apparently world-weary and drooping but concentrating pupils of the eyes, delineated the artist's perception of mankind's fate to be an exercise of repeated endeavours.

by Fayza Haq

The primitive shovel at the subject's left side had been carefully juxtaposed. Similarly, the voluptuous and delectable angels in the backdrop, appearing to guard and support the subjects, had been done in bold, decisive and dramatic strokes (as has been the characteristic style of each and every work of the artist). The spade and the ethereal winged creatures, beside and above him, had been done in lighter tones to offset the main image. This remains my favourite work of the imaginative and intellectual painter, as is surely the case with any other viewer.

Sultan's 'Maachh Dhara' (oil on canvas '91) brings in the exotic village scene of Bangladeshi men and women fishing in a knee-deep river, with bamboo, poles being used by the men, and fine but old remnants of sarees by the women. The determined efforts of the workers, of both

genders and various ages, left an indelible impact on the mind of the viewer, what with the impeccable composition, the balance of colours, and the details of facial and body gestures. Though painted in dark hues, as were most the pieces to be seen at the exhibit, and had been the particular choice of the artist in the later stages of life, there is obvious optimism and admiration in the painter's mind for the once pristine agricultural life of Bangladesh. The backdrop of the sky, the boat-sails, done in triangular and rectangular forms, and the lyrical bushy tree-tops completed the excellent painting, where no essential details had been omitted.

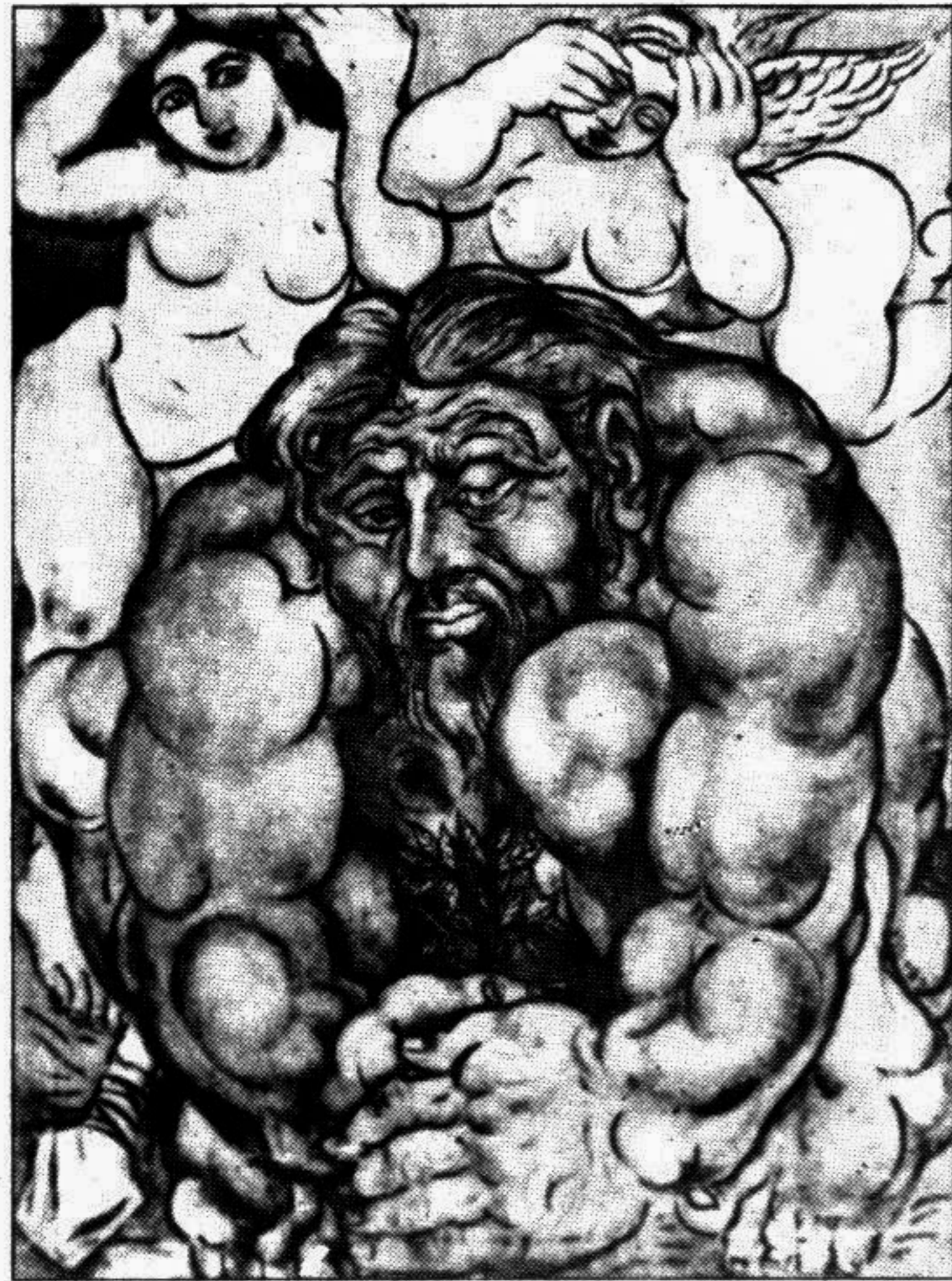
Another exotic piece, seen at the display was 'Dhan Bhana-3' (water-colour on handmade paper, done in '93) that had a texture that a passing view might have mistaken for that of a canvas. This showed the sturdy and relentless work of our village women.

This was obviously a significant piece, for universally women have been dominated for centuries. Since the beginning of mankind and as far back as when women's liberation has been the focal point of writers of both fact and fiction, poets, philosophers, biographers and anthropologists, and it still remains a vital issue today.

The farming women were shown as threshing rice, under a thatched shed. The subjects appeared totally preoccupied with their arduous work. Although done in water-colour, a photographic replica of it might have been misconstrued.

The details of the subjects, and the massive hand-constructed threshing machine (comprising wood and bamboo) might have been taken to be oil strokes — such were the dynamic and confident sweeps and lines of the master painter.

To me, what appeared more fascinating than most of the



Prothom Brikharapon



Nadi O Nauka



Dhan Bhana



## There is No Beyond to Kanika's *Dinanto Belai*

**I**N the thirties nobody much cared for Tagore Song — at least at the beginning of the decade. The coinage Rabindra-Sangeet was yet to earn currency. The whole of the Bengalee People's society had of course been swamped by Tagore's patriotic numbers during the *Banga-bhanga* days of 1905 to 1911, but not many knew those were the creations of the great poet who was to bag the Nobel in a matter of years. It was in 1933 that Pankaj Kumar Mullik coaxed and cajoled Rabindranath into allowing a number of his songs to be used in Pramathesh Barua's filmic masterpiece that celebrated the graduation of movies into talkies and the beginning of playback singing — both firsts being scored by the New

Theatres of Calcutta. Mukti had about three Tagore Songs which overnight became of the rage of the urban literati *Ami kaan pete roi, Aaj shobar rongey rong mishatey hobey and Diner sheshey ghumer deshey* — the last one a Tagore poem converted into the song form by Pankaj Mullik himself — opened a chink through which a literal flood of Tagore Songs surged on to the musical situation of Bengal. What a heavenly bevy of inspired artists then cut innumerable records — Amita Sen, Kanak Das, Indulekha Gosh, Shahana Devi etc. But a most lasting of all that happened then passed away quite unnoticed.

Two of Tagore's remarkable melodies are *Dakbona dakbona*, done in the *Keertan* style and *Mounney ki dudhda*

*rekhe gele choley*, a hauntingly beautiful composition in *Yanan Kalyan*. These two came in a 78 rpm disc in 1934. Although the year before the singer of these had cut another record of modern songs, there was no

dyopadhyay rose on the musical horizon of the Bengalee people. Here is the power of a flower's soft splendour, its mellow yet pervasive fragrance and the suppleness of its



reason for anyone to take notice of her as yet and know here was come someone who would rule without respite the art songs a Bengal for sixty years. One reason for that was the singer was barely ten when she sang for the Tagore-song disk. This very gramophone record continued to be played very lovingly for about 50 years without anyone ever suspecting that the artist had not yet reached her teens. The rendition was so mature and the voice that came was a full-grown woman's, a woman accomplished in all aspects of a cultured life. The debut was immaculate. Such was the power with which Kanika Ban-

touch. Her renditions break on the beach of our hearts and the beach is shot through with something that transforms it for eternity. The stupendous Tagore sentiments and sensibilities, his delvings into entities eternal attain consummation only when Kanika enlivens some of them; not with her genius alone but with her feeling, not only by her grasp but also by her reach. And in so doing she aspires to a height seldom negotiated by the myriad artists of our ancient nation. She has set a standard for sophistication and refinement — a standard but not quite reachable by many in a century. Relinquishment of what? To begin

with — of speech. And then all other modes of expression that a singing voice is capable of. And then of inner comprehensions and realisations and other mysteries and capping it all with the supreme refinement of transporting these to the listener.

When one stumbles upon that plaintive Tagore *Brajabul* piece from *Bhanusingher Padaboli, Aaju sakhhi muh-muha*, as recreated by Kanika, one knows for sure that, not to speak of all others, the artist herself wouldn't be able to excel this recorded performance. It is this same feeling that comes back to one on hearing each of Tagore's many genres of songs come to life through Kanika reliving it. *Bau!* You have *Amar mone jakhon jagnarey Keertan?* There is *Ami jene shuney tobu bhuley aachhi*. And there is *Dubi Amrito Patharey* — a Dhamar in lull for lovers of high classical. Or for connoisseurs of the semi-Dhrupad genre *Amar mi lan lagi tumi in Adana Bahar* or *Bipula tarongo rey in Bhipalassree* For similar unbeatable in the modern and purely original and wholly Tagorean genre one wouldn't know where to start and where to end. The themes of these are Love and Nature and one can start a journey into a wondrous land say with *Dujoney dekha holo* and continue the eastward journey via *Barota peyechhi mounney mounney* to an unknown destination. But if I am allowed my say, I would say the destination is not quite unknown. The dream journey cannot continue beyond *Dinanto belai shesher phashol* for here we have already arrived at eternity and there is no beyond to it. There cannot be. Call it *moksha*, call it *nirvana* — on hearing Kanika's

rendition of it one indeed arrives, the whole point of life is reached and internalised and passed. The idle thud of the oars on the watery expanse of eternity, the unhurried sways of the wings of the flying swan that knows no station engulfs our senses in a blissful end to all strivings of our mortal coil. Tagore in one of his songs said life for me would fill itself up with the flower's melodious ease, and let my dusk die with the ease of that same melody. I say unto myself let my end come with Kanika's *Dinanto belai* wafting ethereally from far and transporting me to eternity in company of those swans.

To dip oneself into the mysteries of the art of Kanika Bandyopadddiyay one would need to go first and meaningfully to Tagore. And then one would need to understand Santiniketan. For Kanika, born as she was there and with all of her seventy years spent there, is a living Santiniketan. One good clue to her music was to know her guru Shailaranjan Majumdar, but he is no more. Rabindranath himself christened her Kanika. Perhaps on seeing the angelic face of the beautiful child that lighted up the Santiniketan *ashram* of the mid-twenties, he had an afterthought and called her 'Mohur' — the gold coin. So she indeed has been for the Bengali culture ever since 1934. And she continues into her eighth decade on earth with undiminished power — of love and melody. This is in spite of a host of debilitating and disabling diseases taking hold of her. But she goes on, singing and teaching. Hers is a supreme example of heroism, subdued and subtle and truly of the spirit. She has no comparison nor there will ever be any.

## Viewing Video

by Lenin Gani

**A**FTER watching the *Time Cop* you will get the distinct impression that the producers took some pages from the *Total Recall* script before shooting the film. In *Time Cop*, Jean Claude Van Damme is a futuristic policeman whose duty it is to track down the 'bad guys' in various dimensions — from the 1800s to the present day — and bring them to justice. Van Damme later uses his ability to prevent the brutal murder of his wife by some hired thugs for reasons unclear. Some of the fight sequences are okay, but overall, they are not of the same standard as it was observed in the *Hard Target*.

*The Confessional* is an intriguing two-part British spy thriller. The KGB have sent a well-trained agent in the guise of an Irish priest to first infiltrate the English Clergy and later assassinate the Pope. In the process, only his closest

friend stands in the way. The assassin's real name is Thomas Kelly but his code name is Cohelen. Anyway before he is sent to Ireland he meets Liam Devlin, a one-time IRA leader now living in Boston. Devlin has renounced violence as the memories of a defective bomb that killed a bridal party continually haunt him. Kelly tries to convince Devlin to join him in Ireland in spite of killings of prominent persons prompt the British intelligence to act. They persuade Devlin to act as their spy. Kelly in the meantime, stops at nothing to achieve his mission, killing even his contact man. While Devlin looks for clues he gets involved with a beautiful Russian pianist who has a grudge against him because she saw through her own eyes the murder of her father. The plot takes plenty of twists and turns before the final showdown of the two friends with only the Pope a bullet away.



ENGLISH		
NAME	TYPE	CAST
1. Natural Born Killers	(Action)	Woody Harrelson/Juliette Lewis/Robert Downey Jr./Tommy Lee Jones
2. Maverick	(Comedy/Western)	Mel Gibson/Jodie Foster/James Garner
3. The Specialist	(Action)	Sylvester Stallone/Sharon Stone/James Wood
4. I Spy Returns	(Comedy)	Bill Cosby/Robert Culp
5. Men of War	(Action)	Dolph Lundgren
6. Vault of Horror	(Horror)	Joe Pesci/Whoopi Goldberg
7. The Confessional	(Spy/Thriller)	Robert Lindsay/Keith Carradine/Robert Lang/Simon Fox
8. Time Cop	(Action)	Jean Claude Van Damme
HINDI		
NAME	TYPE	CAST
1. Aamanat	(Action)	Sanjay Dutt/Akshay Kumar/Gautami/Kiran Kumar/Gulshan Grover/Mukesh Khanna
2. Stuntman	(Social/Rom)	Jackie Shroff/Zeba Bhaktiar/Shakti Kapoor/Tinu Anand/Satish Shaha
BANGLA		
NAME	TYPE	CAST
1. Hotel Snow Fox	(Action)	Uttam Kumar/Mithu Asit Baran
2. Personal Assistant	(Rom/Comedy)	Bhanu/Ruma Devi
3. Kalpurush	(Act/Rom)	Prasenjeet/Shatabdi Roy
4. Dhuli	(Social)	Suchitra Sen/Mala Singha/Chhabi Biswas
MUSICALS		
1. Naya Nagne	Vol 32	
2. Nagne Hi Nagne	Vol 26	
3. Masti Bhare Geet	Source: Film Fair Video and other clubs	

## My Glittering Tears

by Hubert Francis Sarkar

Mesopotamia.  
Assyria, Babylon, Mohenjodaro.  
Alexandria, Greece, Rome, Mayans.

All are my glittering tears.  
My agony the burden of the world,  
I shoulder.

The ascendant Sun Knows  
The spatially-thinned moon knows  
How through anguish and love  
a great edifice grows.

They are the constant witnesses besides you, my goddess

Yes, agony is mine  
Glory is yours  
Passion is mine.  
Compassion is yours

Yes, love, the flame, the stallion  
Scourges dead-old stolid tradition.  
And, again, the self-proclaimed Magis talk of tergiversations  
Of the vices of not prostrating to the idols in the pantheon  
Thus my inner stirrings  
Come out in a torrent and shake the kings