

CONVERSATION

The Hand that Held the Gun ... and Holds the Brush ...

Shahabuddin : A Continuous Journey to Creation

by Arshad-uz Zaman



His paintings depict a unique force

As far back as his memory travels of his 45 years, Shahabuddin remembers that he has always had a passion for painting. This passion burns brightly to this day.

Shahabuddin's love for painting began early. His early years in his father's Kolabagan middle class home was uneventful. Like other kids of the neighbourhood he went to school, got reasonable grades and passed Secondary school.

These were the sixties and politics in East Pakistan was heating up. I lived in a home full of politics," Shahabuddin said. "Like everyone at the time, my father was an Awami League activist, knew Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman well, visited him regularly," added Shahabuddin. Their Kolabagan home was a stone's throw from the most famous house of Bangladesh, popularly known as Road No 32, residence of Bangabandhu. Politics was talked excitedly in the house of Shahabuddin, who had an ambivalent attitude towards politics. Students of his age group were mostly involved in active student politics.

Agartala Conspiracy Case gave Shahabuddin a first taste of politics. The trial of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on trumped up charges of conspiring to separate East Pakistan from West Pakistan with the help of India, was making Bengali passion reach new heights. Streets of Dhaka were reverberating with sounds of 'jela tala bhangbo, Sheikh Mujibke arbo' (we shall break open the jail lock, we shall free Sheikh Mujib). 'Jago Bangalee jago' (awake Bangalee awake) was another popular slogan which would start early in the morning and the booming answer would come 'Bangalee jegeche' (Bangalee has awakened).

Shahabuddin by now had joined the Arts College and had established himself as a brilliant student. During his secondary school years he had won the first prize in an all Pakistan contest of teen age artists and received the prize from President Ayub Khan of Pakistan. The picture showing him receiving the prize from Ayub adorned his wall. Agartala Conspiracy Case brought the people of Dhaka out in the streets. It was a popular uprising which sounded the death knell of Pakistan. Shahabuddin could not remain unaffected. Arts college was in the heart of the University campus and the Arts college students were militant Bangalee nationalists like their colleagues from other faculties. "I painted pictures of militant Bangalees shouting slogans. I painted masses parading through the streets of Dhaka with the dead body of student leader Asad, Sheikh Kamal, the eldest son of Bangabandhu, who had good hand writing, wrote the captions," said Shahabuddin.

Shahabuddin's involvement in politics became nearly total on 7 March 1971. "Bangabandhu was going to address a most important meeting in Suhrawardy Uddan" he remembers. "I was standing on the roof on Arts College. There was a sea of humanity, most of them holding aloft bamboo sticks. They were shouting sky rending slogans for independence. I felt cut off from the masses, so I came down from the roof and stood with the huge crowd. I was surprised to see some foreigners," said Shahabuddin. "Then I saw Bangabandhu standing erect on that large dais, with his spotless white pajama and Kurta and the black Mujib coat. His sight electrified me like nothing I had done till that date," added Shahabuddin. "What do you remember of that speech?" I asked. "That sentence where he said 'If I fail to return you must carry on your struggle till you achieve independence,'" said Shahabuddin without a moment's hesitation, and quickly added "of course Bangabandhu's words 'ebarer sangram mukti sangram, ebarer sangram shadinatar sangram' (struggles this time is for emancipation, struggle this time is for independence) still rings in my ears." This was ENERGY" added Shahabuddin. In fact ENERGY is a most popular and fairly describes artist Shahabuddin.

"What were you doing on 25 March since you had by now been fully drawn into politics," I asked. "We were hearing wild rumours in the neighbourhood about impending Pakistani military onslaught. No one seemed to know for sure. My father was in Road 32. Towards the evening we heard movement of tanks in the streets. I joined my student friends of the neighbourhood to build barricades with branches of trees and bricks. Towards midnight we were all awake and suddenly I heard rockets which lit the sky." Expressive Shahabuddin accurately reproduced the whizzing of rocket sound. Indeed watching Shahabuddin narrate it is reliving those dramatic days. "I was hearing continuous sound of heavy weapons fire from the University area. Curfew had been clamped throughout the city and my father made sure that we were indoors. Occasionally we went up to the roof top and saw Dhaka sky lit with gunfire. Pakistan army had let loose pandemonium," added Shahabuddin.

Shahabuddin's father, an Awami League activist like other members of his party, who were a particular target of the Pakistan army, left Dhaka and moved to the countryside. Shahabuddin decided to stay home. On 27 March, when curfew was briefly lifted Shahabuddin went out into the streets and saw for the first time several dead bodies rotting. On 28 March Shahabuddin's mood of gloom was temporarily uplifted when

Gram Bangla: Oil on canvas

he heard Maj Zia's voice on the radio announcing Independence in the name of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Shahabuddin is a man of many moods and they range from exhilaration to black depression. Like most Bangalees he broods often. He had a close brush with death in late March. Pakistani soldiers in the streets were picking up any young healthy looking Bangalee, whom they would suspect to be a political activist. Pakistani soldiers raided the house of Shahabuddin. It was the picture receiving prize from President Ayub Khan that saved the day for him.

On 6 April Shahabuddin along with some friends started on foot for Calcutta, like most young men of his age had done. A training camp had been set up in Agartala, which was run by his father. Shahabuddin's father gave him a letter for helping his admission in the Arts College in Calcutta. He also met the student leader A S M Abdur Rob, who gave him a certificate. "I train journey to Calcutta took me four days. The train was full of refugees fleeing from East Pakistan and it was very filthy," recalls Shahabuddin.

"How did you manage to join the Liberation War?" I asked Shahabuddin. "With my letter from my father, I went straight to the Calcutta Arts College. I met Principal



Victor 2: Oil on canvas

Chintamani Kor. He scolded me by saying that he had closed his College because of the Liberation War in Bangladesh. "This is no time to paint. Go join the War," he said. "I want to a place in the Calcutta University neighbourhood and found many famous Bangalees like painter Kamrul Hasan, film maker Zahir Raihan and many singers. The atmosphere was one of gaiety and the air was thick with Joy Bangla slogans," said Shahabuddin. It took some time for Shahabuddin to join the forces of Liberation War. There is a tiny village called Kanchrapara on the border between Bangladesh and West Bengal, which has remained permanently etched in his memory. "If ever I can get away from it all I shall settle in Kanchrapara," says Shahabuddin sentimentally. He calls it heaven and 'heaven' recurs frequently in the language of Shahabuddin which is very often body language.

In April Shahabuddin made a short visit to his Dhaka home, collected nine colleagues and walked back to Agartala. This time they found the training camp and its commander. The new group of 65 fresh recruits had a Platoon Commander-Shahabuddin. He had joined the Liberation War almost accidentally and had been chosen Platoon Commander purely by chance. "As we stood there, the Army Officer addressing our group said, 'I want someone to be your Platoon Commander. Some of my friends took my hand and raised it along with theirs. I thus became the Platoon Commander.'" Shahabuddin narrated all this without bravura, with a touch of shyness. Shahabuddin and his Platoon underwent 24 days training in the art of sabotage and guerilla type of operation.

"What about your painting?" I asked Shahabuddin. "Melaghor was a small town not far from the border. On my request our local Commander Capt Shawkat got me paint, brush etc and I worked in the jungle with petrolmax light," said Shahabuddin. I painted a portrait of Bangabandhu with an eye liner. In order to cheer up the guerillas a Cultural evening was organised deep inside the jungle. We used polythene to prepare a make shift room and improvised a stage where our artists performed. For special effect my painting of Bangabandhu stood high lit specially by torchlight," narrated Shahabuddin.

"Maj Khalid Musharraf was our area Commander. In August he sent our Platoon of 72 to the border to fight," continued Shahabuddin. The world ENERGY reappeared in Shahabuddin's description and his face lit up. It was sheer excitement without heroic antics. It is during this operation that Shahabuddin faced the greatest test as a Freedom Fighter. "Shalda river on the border was my area of responsibility. Against our 72 fighters were ranged heavily armed 400 Pakistani soldiers supported by Razakars. We were ambushed. We lived on plants, tree roots and anything we could lay our hands on. The fight went on for 14 days. I had on my hands a colleague, who had been hit by a bullet and was profusely bleeding. In the cover of the night, we crossed the river with our colleague. We managed a safe retreat. We sent our colleague for treatment and he is hale and hearty today," narrated Shahabuddin.

By September heavy weapons mainly from Russian source had become available. Shahabuddin received orders to enter Dhaka via Savar. A Company of 160 reached the outskirts of Dhaka in early September. They camped in a village near Savar, which had been burnt by Pakistani army and the air smelt of burning. He decided that his Platoon should have codename 'Mukti' (Freedom). "We carried out operations inside Dhaka," continued Shahabuddin "and it was during one such operation we lost our Company Commander Manik, who was blowing up a bridge." "Pumpkin was a favourite item for hiding grenades and we used camouflage on boats while bringing weapons. In any case all boatmen were Mukti Bahini," said Shahabuddin. He remembers one confrontation with Pakistani army at Mirpur bridge, when he arrested three Pakistani soldiers.

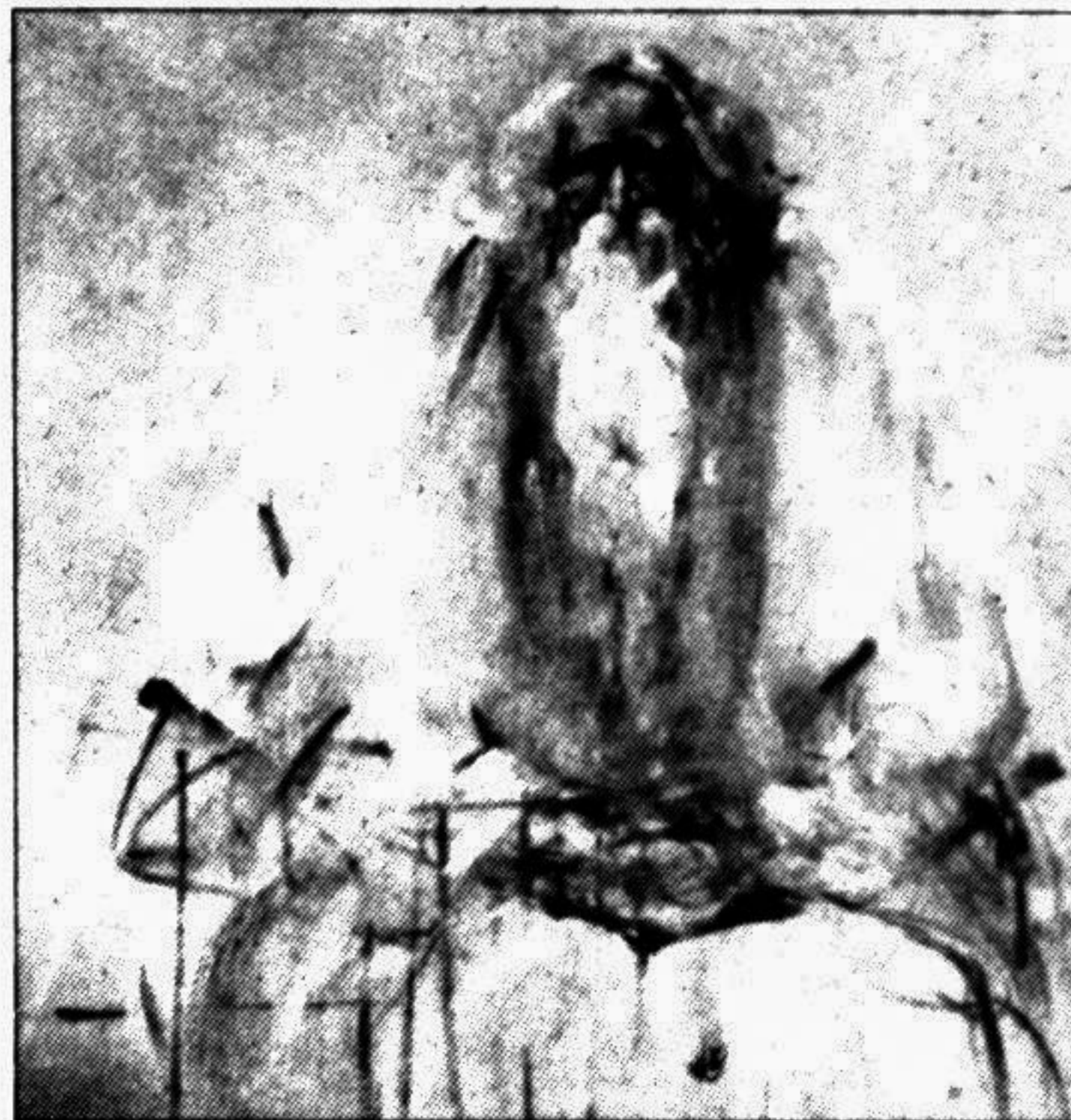
It was in November that Shahabuddin reentered Dhaka. Rapidly his Kolabagan home became an arsenal. He was in Dhaka when war broke out between India and Bangladesh forces on one side and Pakistan on the other. On 14 December 12 Platoon Commanders met in the home of Shahabuddin. It was clear that surrender of Pakistan forces was a matter of days if not hours.

On 16 December I and some of my colleagues started going towards Intercontinental Hotel. Dhaka airport had been immobilized by Indian bombing. As we approached the Radio Station, I saw Pakistan

flag flying on top of the building. A feeling of rage ran through my veins. I walked up to the top of the building. I tore down the Pakistani flag. A friend had handed me a crumpled Bangladesh flag with the map of Bangladesh. I hoisted it. I saluted it. I cried 'Joy Bangla' at the top of my lungs," said Shahabuddin.

From Platoon Commander to Painter

"How did it feel to return to painting after the excitement of the Liberation War?" I asked. Shahabuddin said simply. "It



Tajore: Oil on canvas

was very simple. I returned to where I always belonged." There was a brief ceremony at the Gonobhaban where he surrendered arms to Bangabandhu. "This was the first time I saw Bangabandhu from so close," said Shahabuddin. "He patted me on my cheek as was his habit, when I told him that I was returning to my Arts College."

Very easily Shahabuddin became the top student of his class and obtained Prime Minister's Gold Medal. He came in contact with the most celebrated painter of Bangladesh — Zainul Abedin, who took great interest in his career. I asked Shahabuddin. "Zainul Abedin became famous throughout India in 1942 by his famine sketches in charcoal. It is during this operation that Shahabuddin faced the greatest test as a Freedom Fighter. "Shalda river on the border was my area of responsibility. Against our 72 fighters were ranged heavily armed 400 Pakistani soldiers supported by Razakars. We were ambushed. We lived on plants, tree roots and anything we could lay our hands on. The fight went on for 14 days. I had on my hands a colleague, who had been hit by a bullet and was profusely bleeding. In the cover of the night, we crossed the river with our colleague. We managed a safe retreat. We sent our colleague for treatment and he is hale and hearty today," narrated Shahabuddin.

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Shahabuddin used his time painting, which he found more interesting than learning French only. While walking on the seaside, he saw one afternoon and old lady painting. He offered to show her how to paint. He gave a demonstration with a few strokes of the brush. This was the beginning of a friendship with Yvonne, which was to last many years. Yvonne invited him to stay at her home and paint. Shahabuddin found it more amusing than following French classes. He held a solo exhibition in Royan and became an instant area celebrity. A



Tajore: Oil on canvas

mother son relationship developed between Yvonne and Shahabuddin.

On 15 August 1975 Yvonne informed him about the killing of the leader of Bangladesh about whom she had heard so much from Shahabuddin. An incredulous Shahabuddin kept fiddling with the radio and in the course of the day learnt of the assassination of his hero, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur



Bangabandhu: Oil on canvas

Rahman. "I had not said good bye to Bangabandhu when I left Dhaka and I shall not see him again," said Shahabuddin. "I felt I had lost my dearest possession and felt the world vanishing from under my feet. I decided to go to Paris and return home," added Shahabuddin. "Within no time I noticed that everything in our Embassy in Paris changed" added ruefully Shahabuddin. "I joined the Ecole des Beaux Arts (School of Fine Arts) but found no joy in my work." Shahabuddin had entered his periodic depression. He continued to paint however and stood first in the annual competition of his school. Shahabuddin participated in the Salon des Artistes Français in the Grand Salon and obtained the second prize.

In October 1976 Shahabuddin returned to Dhaka and contacted Gen Zia "who received me warmly." "During my short stay I held an exhibition in the Arts College and it was well received," added Shahabuddin.

The years between 1977-79 were spent in Paris and some other European capitals. "It was in 1979 that an incident took place which changed my life," recalled Shahabuddin. "Galerie Claude Bernard, one of the three top Galleries of the world, is located near my



Shahabuddin

School of Beaux Arts. To exhibit in that Galerie is the ultimate dream of any painter," continued Shahabuddin. "One day while looking into the Galerie I saw the exhibition of Francis Bacon. It struck me like lightning. I said to myself this is what I had been looking for," added Shahabuddin. "I changed my palette, canvas, brush, everything and started painting furiously. My friends in the school started calling me sarcastically petit Bacon, remembered Shahabuddin. I did not mind and I painted one whole year in this fashion," added Shahabuddin. "What was it that struck you in Bacon?" I asked Shahabuddin. "The strength in his lines," said Shahabuddin without a moment's hesitation. "He is modern and the kind of modern close to my heart," added Shahabuddin. With ENERGY POWER is a recurring theme in Shahabuddin's painting.

"One afternoon as I was painting alone, I felt a friendly hand at my back. It was the hand of my Professor Nallard, who had watched me change my style. He encouraged me to pursue this path," narrated Shahabuddin. "I made up my mind to exhibit in Galerie Claude Bernard. My scholarship was due to end in 1980. I felt I had to continue to say in Paris to develop my painting further and remain in touch with modern trends. I befriended the Secretary for the Galerie Bernard and showed him slides of some of my paintings. The Secretary gave some suggestions. Meanwhile my name started spreading in Paris arts circles. My school selected 12 young painters and I was number one," added Shahabuddin. "Then one day the Secretary wanted my drawings. I had never done drawings. I locked myself in my little room and started drawing. For the first time I

Since his drawing hung at Galerie Claude Bernard, Shahabuddin has never looked back. During the Seoul Olympics in 1988 his painting was selected among 100 living painters of the world. The exhibition organised under the patronage of President Mitterrand of France travelled throughout the world. In an exhibition in Taiwan in 1990 his painting figured among 100 painters living in Paris. During the Barcelona Olympics a souvenir was brought out containing paintings of 50 modern Masters including Shahabuddin. In 1990 again Shahabuddin held 8 solo exhibitions throughout France.

In 1994 Shahabuddin exhibited for the first time in India in Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta. There was enthusiastic reception for his paintings. "How did it feel to exhibit in Calcutta, a city you went to join the War of Liberation," I asked. "It felt very good," said Shahabuddin simply. "Many came to see not only my paintings but me the Freedom Fighter. I should like to go back."

ENERGY and POWER that is Shahabuddin. As I watched him paint in his Kolabagan studio on the ground floor, he was the picture of concentration. Wearing baggy trousers and a red sweater on a shirt, his right foot forward, brush firmly in right hand, left hand at the back holding a towel, abundant hair flying in all directions and which refused to stay in place, he is like a panther waiting for his prey. It is a huge canvas in front of him. Once in a while he leaps in the air to reach the highest point and administers a bold stroke. The taut muscle of the Freedom Fighter, that is raw power. The forward movement of his subject, that is grace and power.

Shahabuddin appeared with the War of Liberation. His painting has become synonymous with the Freedom Fighter. The good news is Shahabuddin continues to evolve and grow and is explor-

used charcoal. After one month's work I took 36 big drawings to the Secretary of the Claude Bernard Galerie. My dream was realized and Claude Bernard hung my drawing in the Galerie. My name spread like wildfire," said Shahabuddin a little short of breath. Shahabuddin's scholarship problem was solved without a hitch.

The next important event was the arrival of Pierre Parrad, a very famous architect of Paris, who bought one of Shahabuddin's painting. He became Shahabuddin's fan, held a solo exhibition of Shahabuddin's painting in his newly opened Galerie.

In 1981 Shahabuddin held an exhibition at Shilpakala Academy. There was an unpleasant experience in store for him. Among his exhibits was a painting of Bangabandhu, writing in pain after being shot. The authorities asked him to remove the painting. He handed over the painting to Sheikh Hasina and it hangs ever since at Bangabandhu Bhavan at Road 32 at Dhanmondi.

In 1983 Shahabuddin held another exhibition in Shilpakala Academy. Among his paintings there was a large one showing Bangabandhu and a concentric circle of famous Bangalees, past and present.

President H M Ershad was visiting the exhibition that day. There was tight security including many plainclothesmen. I mingled with them like a visitor and watched with them the painting of Bangabandhu. They told me to disappear because it would cause trouble," Shahabuddin narrated to me. There was no malice but in comprehension about the fact that he could not exhibit the painting of the only hero that the world knew, who had lit the fire of independence in June. I had come to Dhaka from Jeddah where I was then Assistant Secretary General of OIC. I had known Shahabuddin since early seventies when I was Chief of Protocol and he came to sell his paintings. Now in 1983 Shahabuddin took me to his Kolabagan studio, carefully selected a large painting of a Freedom Fighter and it is my most prized possession of his paintings.

Shahabuddin, the famous painter

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Self: Oil on canvas

ing new horizons. He brought those results in his recent exhibitions at Shilpakala and Gallery Tone of Dhaka.

"There is anger within me as I see misery among my fellow men all around. I would give anything to alleviate their suffering," said Shahabuddin with utmost sincerity in answer to my question regarding his plans for the future. His two little girls chattered away in Bangla and French. His young architect discussed plans for the future studio and gallery of Shahabuddin in Kolabagan. Shahabuddin will stay in Paris to stay in touch with modern trends but will always return to his Kolabagan home near the Dhanmondi lake.