

exhibition

## Searching for the Soul of Gram Bangla

by Fayza Haq

**A** younger colleague of Zainul Abedin, Mahbulul Amin has taught at the Fine Arts Institute, DU for 33 years. Today he has had his first solo exhibition at the Divine Art Gallery, with fascinating delineation of his subjects from Gram Bangla, with its exotic motifs of birds, boats, flowers, bauls, ek-tara, buffaloes and village beauties. The colours are vibrant, buoyant, bold and dramatic. The strokes are quick and subtle, the work being done in splashes and impressionistic effects. He has combined the techniques of the west with the creative imagination of the east. These delineations of local village life certainly appeal both to the Bangladeshi and foreign art lovers. Their decorative impact with the startling yellows and reds undoubtedly won the hearts of those who seek to view something decorative to take their minds off from the madding crowd.

Dwelling on his themes and techniques, Mahbulul says, "My subject is the life and culture of Bangladesh and my media is water based acrylic, which is easy to handle. I have always done realistic paintings and am not drawn to abstractions. That is why you see landscapes and the living objects that go with it, such as the flora and fauna. I have done various experiments in this line for 35 years. My forms and perspectives are not realistic, as you see, though easy to recognise. The colours, however, are taken straight from my concept of nature. Folk motifs have been used such as flowers, doves, ek-taras, festive buntings and alpina designs to enhance the charm of the pieces."

Speaking about how he goes about his work, Mahbulul informs me, "I usually work at night, after 10 pm, as I am weary after my work in the day time and take a respite in between. I often listen to sitar and ek-tara music and ghazals, while at work. I have no studio of my own. Living in the University quarters, I have a small space in my daughter's study. My materials are all from England as they are not made locally."

Speaking about his aim in painting, Mahbulul says, "All painters work in-



BOY WITH FLUTE 36X56 cm Acrylic on Paper 1998



FOLK SINGER 36X56 cm Acrylic on Paper 1998



HUSKING 36X56 cm Acrylic on Paper 1998



REST 36X56 cm Acrylic on Paper 1998

tially to please themselves. Of course, my clients are also kept in mind during my exhibition. If the art lover cannot comprehend my paintings, I find no purpose in my work. My patrons are mostly the local art connoisseurs like businessmen and intellectuals. My price range from Tk 5,000 to Tk 20,000."

Asked to compare the work of local painters with those in the rest of the subcontinent and in Japan and USA, Mahbulul says confidently, "I believe our work is quite rich and in no way inferior to those in India or Pakistan. Technically, painters in the west and in Japan are naturally far superior to us."

Dwelling on the artists who have inspired him, Mahbulul informs me, "My teachers like Rafiqun Nabi, and others like Qayyum Chowdhury, Abdul Baset have had impact on my work. Earlier, as a student, I like the Renaissance painters like Michaelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci whom I copied ad lib. Impressionists like Matisse, Renoir, Cezanne and Manet have influence on my work even today, as you can see El Greco remains my favourite. As for modern abstract painters like Pollock, they hold no fascination for me."

"Although this is my first solo exhibition, I have held about 40 group ex-

hibits in places like Turkey, India and Pakistan in the past," the artist says when asked about his public exposure.

Requested to give his advice to young painters, Mahbulul comments, "Practice is the secret of success. Talent develops with constant dedication and repeated efforts. Nobody is a born artist. Among my students I like the works of Jamal, Eunus, Iqbal, and Ranjit Das."

In "Lalon" there is a picture of a man with a top-knot, and he has yellow birds outline in red and with various designs on them, almost like motifs, in front of him. On his two sides are two massive ancient Indian pillars. There is also a dhol, done in soft washes of blue and pink. Beyond that are trees and lopsided thatched huts. The decorative and thematic effect are heightened with faintly done varied coloured buntings. Temples are also included to heighten the effect of the setting. On top is an ek-tara which is depicted vertically rather than the traditional upright fashion. This itself is in pink and red and decorated with minute floral motifs. Geometrical patterns sweep down in red, blue and green. Human beings and nature are amalgamated with harmony. Parts of the paper at the sides are left in their original white to highlight and offset

the work, which Mahmud does in almost all his works. The colours are subtle pastel on the whole, and this is the artist's specialty. The final impact is a very appealing and comprehensive depiction of the rural aspect of Bangladesh.

"Celebration '71" has a typical Bangladeshi woman in a yellow saree with a delicate red border, covering her mouth with shyness. The large doe eyes, prominent nose raven hair and strips of bangles on her hand add to her charm. Behind her is a huge elephant done in pink, gray and blue gentle sweeping washes and motifs. It has a decorative bell with matching pink designs on it. There are figures on the elephant draped in simple lungi and saree of stripes and checks in pale strokes in a single colour. The figures are black and gray. To the left of the animal is a diminutive village hut with its thatching done in gray geometrical patterns of scallops and triangles. Swirling alongside this are buntings to heighten the mood of gaiety and achievement. Banana trees in pale green and flying birds are also brought in. Prancing goats, lotus blossoms and swans in muted colours form a motif in the foreground.

In "musician" we see a person totally

wrapped in his guitar playing with a swish of curly hair thrown in wild abandon, and this is done in brown and deep red. At the top is a yellow bird taken from typical Bangladeshi motifs so that it has delectable geometrical patterns to denote the feathers and details of the throat. This is done in blue and yellow, which matches the bunting in the backdrop, that the artist has such a penchant for delineating in almost all his major works. Rectangle strokes and floral motifs in the background offset the subjects. Another bird is brought in the background and this is set off by a large flower which is done in a semi-abstract manner. Ribbons of motifs float from left to right of the picture to add to the composition and which match with the main work. Further down are more flora and fauna done in subtle and deft oranges and grays. Although numerous folk motifs are brought into the work is impressionistic. The play of light and shade of the guitar player and the capturing of the frenzy of the violin player is admirable.

"Birds in Cages" has a Mahmud's favourite theme of birds. A bird, depicted in a cage is done with swift brush strokes. It is almost a sketch although done in acrylic. The pink beak and the

tiny motifs on the neck with the black eye makes the subject startlingly dramatic. There is another yellow bird outlined in red, black and brown. The cage in the background is flamboyant with buntings which are only hinted. To enhance the beauty, village huts have been brought in with the backdrop in the forms of geometrical shapes with floral motifs added on in pale mint green, powder blue, salmon pink and jet black. Pale blue in the background offsets the bright colours of the subjects.

A young cowherd is brought in "Dream" shown lying down and playing the flute with a white turban and a decorative lungi with checks and circles down in orange and white. He is shown daydreaming on a floating hammock which is decorated with conventional simple motifs. Trees shown in green and blue swirls are brought at the back. Details of leaves and branches have also been brought in lending tranquillity with its soothing colours and simple shapes. Four houses are also included which are once again more of designs to add to the theme and composition. Below these is a bird, that repeatedly appears in Mahmud's work. This is in chrome yellow heightened by vermilion. In the forefront cattle and their herdsman are depicted with quick, economical and bold strokes in brown and being. Yet again, the marriage of impressionistic figure work with motifs present an idyllic portrayal of the countryside.

"Bird Seller" has a turban to tie up his curly hair. The large but slanted eyes depict the fatigue of the subject. From his arms hang cages of mainas, pigeons and parrots which are presented with such suavity and an eye for detailed work that one would think that they were birds of paradise. The birds of different colours, shapes and decorated with various types of motifs. The picture brings in the feeling of enthusiasm and optimism of uncomplicated village life, as do all the rest of the paintings.

With his dexterous and sophisticated craftsmanship and mastery over water-colour genres, Mahmud has proved himself an excellent artist of the lure of Bangladeshi countryside, bringing in the deep roots of our folk culture, apart from presenting nonpareil picturesque delineations.

### Poems of Jibananda Das

Translated by Fakrul Alam

#### Because I Have Seen Bengal's Face

Because I have seen Bengali's face, I seek no more,  
The world has not anything more beautiful to show to me.  
Waking up in darkness, gazing at the fig-tree, I behold  
Dawn's swallows roosting under huge umbrella-like leaves.  
I look all around me and discover a leafy dome,  
Jam kanthal bat hijal ashwatha trees all in a hush,  
Shadowing clumps of cactus and zeodary bushes.  
When long, long ago, Chand came in his honeycombed boat  
To a blue Hijal Bat tamal shade near Champa, he too sighted

Bengal's incomparable beauty. One day, alas, in the Ganguri,  
As the waning moon sank on the river's sandbanks,  
Behula too saw countless ashwaths bats besides golden rice fields  
And heard the thrush's soft song. One day, arriving in Amara,  
Where gods held court, when she danced like a desolate wagtail,  
Bengal's rivers, fields, flowers, wailed like the strings of bells on her feet.

#### Evening

Evening descends — a serene silence all around;  
Straw in its beak, a shalik flies quietly away;  
The bullock cart rolls down the country road;  
The yard is packed with stacks of golden hay;

All the doves of the world coo in hijal shades;  
All the beauty of the world with the grass coheres;  
All the love of the world rests in our two hearts;  
The sky spreads serenely into skies.

#### Twenty years later

What if twenty years later I meet her once again!  
Twenty years later —  
Perhaps besides a cluster of paddy sheaves  
In the late autumnal month of Kartik —  
When the evening crow homes — when the yellow river  
Softens in the reeds, weeds, tall grass — in the fields!  
Perhaps there won't be any paddy fields then;  
No work then,  
The straw from duck nests  
The straw from bird nests  
Scattering; night in the mania bird's home, the cold, and dewdrops!

Our life having flowed on for twenty long years —  
What if all of a sudden in some country path I find you once again!  
Perhaps then the moon will appear at midnight behind a clump of leaves,  
In its mouth the slender dark branches  
Of shirish or jam,  
Mango — tamarisk trees;  
Twenty years on when I don't have you in my mind any longer!  
Our life having flowed on for twenty long years —  
What if you and I meet once again!

Perhaps then in the fields on owl will and on tiptoe —  
In the acacia rows  
In an ashwath tree opening  
Somewhere it will hide itself!  
Somewhere a kite will drop its wings, as soundlessly as the drop of an eyelid.

Golden, golden kite — lured away by the dew!  
What if twenty years on, suddenly in the fog, I find you!



#### If I were

If I were a wild gander  
And you a wild goose;  
Living next to some faraway Jalshiri river bank  
Inside a solitary nest  
In slender reeds  
Close by paddy fields;

Then in this early spring month of Falgoun  
Looking at the rising moon behind acacia branches  
We would have left the smell of the marshwaters behind  
And let our bodies waft amidst the silvery cornfields of the sky —  
My feathers inside your wings, you heart pulsating against mine —  
Like grains of paddy bursting open when fried, innumerable  
stars would erupt as golden flowers in the sky,  
The Falgoun moon,  
So like the golden egg within a snug nest deep in a shirish forest,  
Would arise;  
Perhaps then the sound of a gun;  
Our zigzag motion,  
Our wings beating with a piston's elation  
In our throats the song of the north wind!

#### A Dream Message

Voices in a dream whisper this message: placidity is right.  
By the lamp lit in the silent winter night,  
Or in bed after having shut out the light,  
The placid man's eyes fill with some other evening's light.  
It is a light which forever stays still;  
Forsaking all one day, I too will  
Be still; giving up my gilt embroidery work one wintry night  
I'll keep lying in bed having shut out the light,  
Like the bat looking at his meandering sky.  
Huddling up in bed, I will keep you in sight:

Placidity, tell me when will you come by.

#### Cities

My heart, you have seen many big cities;  
Cities whose bricks and stones,  
Accents, affairs, hopes, frustrations, and terrifying deprivations  
have turned into ashes in the cauldron of my mind.  
Nevertheless, I have seen the sun arise amidst thick clouds in a corner of a city;  
I have seen the sun on the other side of the river of a port city,  
Like a love-struck farmer, he bears his burden in the  
tangerine-cloud colored fields of the sky;  
Over a city's gaslights and tall minarets I have seen — stars —  
Like flocks of wild geese heading towards some southern sea.

#### The Vultures

From field to field — all afternoon across Asia's skies vultures wheel  
Viewing people, bazars, outposts, slums — theirs silent expanse;  
Just where the solid silence of the fields borders the solence of the skies

As if in their private sky — vultures descend one after the other  
From thick clouds — as if mythical elephants, tired, smoke-coloured,  
Fallen from their far-off homes into light; fallen into the world  
above Asia's fields, meadows and vast expanse.

These forsaken birds hover over Asia for a few moments; then mount again  
In darkness over huge palm trees — over mountain tops and coastlines;  
Viewing the beauty of the world once — watching ships in Bombay

Berth in the port in darkness; then flying off towards delectable malabar;  
Numerous vultures circling over some melancholy turret  
As if forsaking the birds of this world for the far shore of death  
As if Charons crossing into Styx or life's gloomy wrenching lagoons;  
Crying out ... to find suddenly melding into the deep blue hordes of Juns.

#### A Strange Darkness

A strange darkness has descended on the world these days,  
Those who are completely blind claim to see the most;  
Those who feel no love — or affection — or the flutter of pity  
Guide the world now with their counsel.  
And those who still have faith in man  
Who even now feel it is natural to uphold  
Great truths and tradition, to pursue art and meditation  
Have become the prey of jackals and vultures.

