

# World View of Bengal Art

From February 16 to 20, the third International Congress on Bengal Art was held in Rajshahi, Bogra and Dhaka. Professor Enamul Haque, former director general of the National Museum and chairman, board of trustees, the International Centre for Study of Bengal Art, organisers of the congress, recently talked at length with The Daily Star on various aspects related to the congress and the centre itself, how it started, what goals it is pursuing, etc. Here are some excerpts:

**Daily Star:** How did the International Centre for Study of Bengal Art come into being?

**Dr. Enamul Haque:** Actually, when we started in 1995, we realised that this arrangement for the study of Bengal art, anywhere in Bangladesh, or in Bengal including West Bengal of India, is not adequate. There is no specific course for this in any university of Bangladesh or West Bengal in India. That was not the only reason, because we have not started a university.

The study of Bengal art, as a subject didn't get any recognition or importance during the last half-century, say from 1947 onwards because the historic entity of Bengal remains partitioned between two sovereign states and the main archaeological, historical sites, say Mahasthangar, Paharpur, Mainamati, Bagerhat, etc., are situated in Bangladesh, or previously East Pakistan, and the main resource centres for researchers like the National Library in Calcutta, the Indian Museum, Bangla Sahitya Parishad or Ashutosh Museum of Indian Art, such institutions are located in Calcutta. But there was no easy contact between these two sides. So, if we look back, we see that during these last 50 years, not many people have come forward to study this art history and our own art heritage has become more and more remote to us. Our students today do not talk about our art heritage. When they pick subjects, they go for computer science, business administration and such science and modern subjects.

So, in this situation, in 1995, me and my wife (Professor Zulekha Haque) — we are two art historians of sorts, we have had association with the National Museum, thought that we must do something. We were both retired then from our respective jobs, but not from our activities. We were still writing in different journals. We built up our personal library over the years and you can say it is one of the largest private collections of books and journals. We have several journals which are the only copies in Bangladesh. Many books are the only copies in Bangladesh. We are very strong in some aspects of art history. So in these circumstances we thought, before we are invalid, and since neither of our children are interested in art history, we should take initiative in doing something where we can attract people, ordinary citizens as well as students, to study this. That is the primary reason for conceiving this International Centre for Study of Bengal Art.

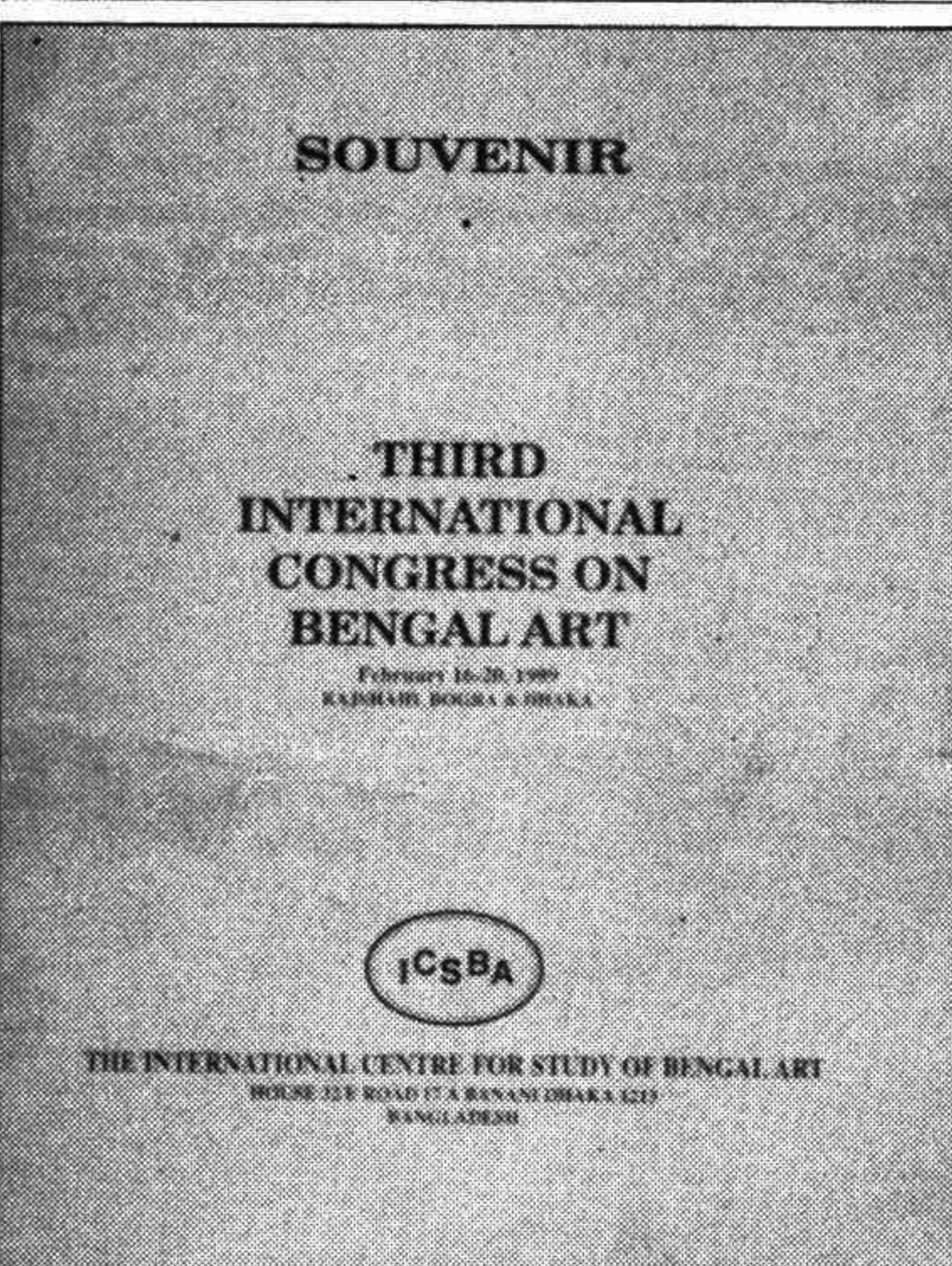
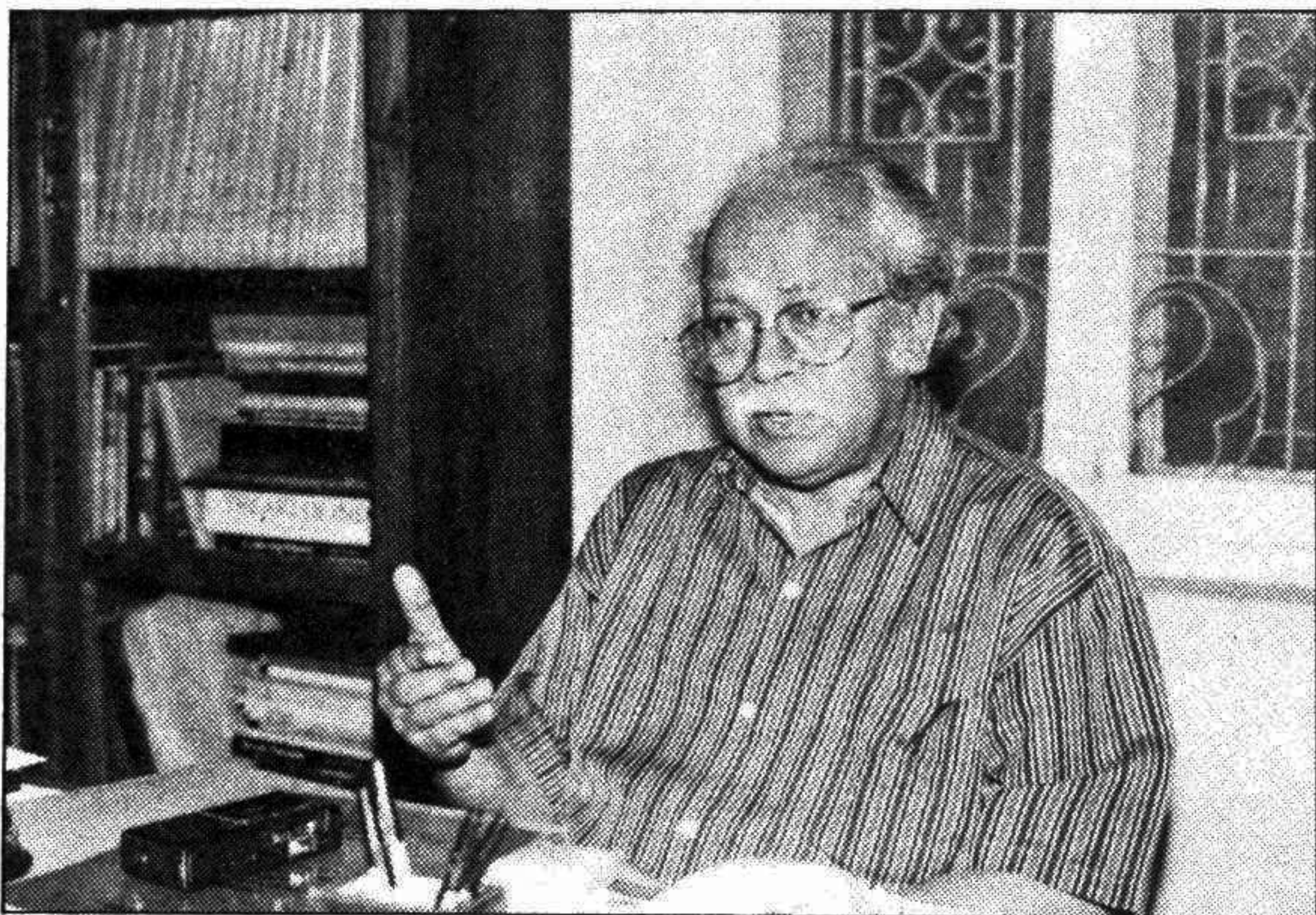
We started this in 1995 August, so its nearly three and a half years now. We have had 17 seminars so far, given by different important authors from within the country, from outside the country. We have had two international congresses. We had a six-day conference beginning in Rajshahi. Three days in Rajshahi, two days in Bogra and excursions to Kusumba mosque of 1555 AD. Then a visit to Paharpur site, Mahasthangar. There were 46 foreign participants. Never before had so many art historians, who are, in one way or the other, associated with Bengal art, assembled at one place. This was in Bangladesh. India could never organise such a gathering although they also study aspects of Bengal art in their study of Indian art. We were very happy that scholars came from the Netherlands, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States and India. They were very eminent and distinguished scholars. They presented their papers and it was a great opportunity for interacting among the scholars coming from different parts of the world.

**DS:** Tell us something about the third International Congress on Bengal Art.

**EH:** This conference was inaugurated by former Chief Justice Mohammed Habibur Rahman. He is a historian and author by himself. He has a number of publications. We were very happy to have him in Rajshahi. He accompanied us for all the five days of the congress starting in Rajshahi and ending in Dhaka. In Dhaka we had the concluding session where Finance Minister Shah AMS Kibria was the chief guest and the State Minister of Foreign Affairs Abul Hasan Chowdhury was the special guest. They were academically both close to Bengal art. To invite ministers at seminars, people always suspect that we have some plan behind it. They are obviously ministers and we have some objectives in inviting them. But their speeches were very much liked by the persons there.

This was the structure of the congress. There were some 54 papers presented. They will be published very soon. Some very eminent people attended the conference. There was one Dr. Goriswar Bhattacharya, who lived in Germany for more than four decades. He is an eminent scholar of Sanskrit epigraphy. He is one of the very few people, now living in this sub-continent, who can read and translate Sanskrit. He was 75 on the day conference began in Rajshahi. He is a connoisseur and collector of art. He presented

## Enamul Haque, former Director General of the National Museum, and now Chairman, Board of Trustees, International Centre for Study of Bengal Art, talks to Mir A Zaman about the Third International Congress on Bengal Art held recently in Dhaka, Rajshahi and Bogra



many items of art from the Indian sub-continent to various museums in the United States and presently he is on the Board of Trustees of the Brooklyn Museum in New York. He was very enthusiastic and participated like a young man. He promised that he would come to the next conference in 2000 or 2001. So that inspired us very much.

Similarly there was the scholar from India, the Professor of India, Dr. Biren Mukherjee. He has extensive knowledge on different branches of history — art history, epigraphy, political history and what not. He is so versatile. He can quote from an inscription he saw in Comilla, what is written on the 13th line and he can easily quote the seventh line of an inscription found somewhere in Tashkent. He can quote from Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran. It is amazing. He is such a genius.

From Germany there was a strong contingent of nine persons. From France there were seven. This was the level of participation. So I think that the scholars, the local scholars from Rajshahi University, Dhaka University, from other places, they immensely gained by getting to mingle these scholars. May people felt inspired. So this was the third international congress.

Our principal objective of this congress was to project Bengal art to the world and to ourselves because now I believe that after seeing this rather sumptuous turn out, these have added confidence to our ability to project Bengal art through these congress, conference, seminars, journals. We can point this out to the young and old, particularly the young who can see that this is a subject they can look into. We want to attract a few young scholars to undertake PhD programmes, affiliated to some university. If necessary, we will finance them because people do not get adequate scholarship of financial support to continue with research activities. I plan to make arrangements to finance them. It is possible to finance willing scholars.

I must mention another important thing. This congress became important for another thing. For the first time in an international conference held in Bangladesh that the Director General of UNESCO sent his special representative to attend. He recognised the importance of the study of Bengal Art when we invited him. He could not come, but he nominated his special senior advisor who is incident-

ally a Bengali who was formerly Ambassador of Bangladesh in Paris. That added some more importance to the conference. He issued a special message on the occasion which we have printed in our souvenir.

**DS:** Shouldn't there be government involvement in this?

**EH:** Government involvement means substantial support. We have requested the Ministry of Finance to financial aid and the Minister has been kind enough to give us ministerial assurance so we hope one day it will be implemented. So we look forward to certain financial support from the government. What else could we expect from the government?

This cannot be run without government support. We publicly appealed to the government at the meeting, that till a few years ago the donors use to get tax benefits. There was an Act that if you donate for certain purposes, you get certain tax deductions. This has been discontinued in Bangladesh for several years. The government was possibly right in doing so because we were misusing these facilities. To evade the payment of taxes, we were creating phantom agencies, charitable society and donating income to that society so as to evade taxes. So the government abrogated this arrangement. We appealed to the Finance Minister that, please employ such stringent rules to distinguish between the so-called organisations and those who publicly work. The Finance Minister assured us publicly that he will look into this and will try to evolve something so we can go to donors within the country. We need government assistance and have applied for it.

**DS:** Have you been promised any kind of grant?

**EH:** No promises, but the minister has assured that we deserve support. Some of the participants at the meeting had eloquently described how the congress had been successful. I have at this moment more than half a dozen e-mails from different parts of the world, moving letters and statements.

**DS:** You say the younger generation don't know much about the history of Bengal art. How do you plan to go about the task of attracting them to it?

**EH:** We are trying to generate interest, trying to encourage people to take up the study of Bengal art.

We are an organisation dedicated to the study of Bengal art, but we cannot impart it because we are not an educational institution. We have had a discussion with the vice-chancellor of Dhaka University on whether the university can open a department for the study of Bengal art. We are making an effort that there should eventually be a university degree course and also, at the museums of the country, the universities of the country and maybe ultimately at the college level, there may be a minor subject of Bengal Art.

When people study Bengali language and literature, they should also have the opportunity of studying Bengali art. It has a history of 2,500 years. We should know the art heritage, what were the art activities 2,000 or 1,500 years ago. These activities have different stylistic developments. These were influenced by outside factors, but, at the same time, Bengal art influenced certain outside countries at different phases of history. Some influences from Bengal went to South-east Asia. Some influence from Bengal went to other parts of India. These are not known to our people. These are known to only a few scholars. These are not adequately established.

We know we had muslin. This is something we are very proud of. But we do not know that some of our architectural motifs, like the *do-chala*, the Bengali village hut *do-chala*, influenced the architecture of central and western India tremendously, but nobody talks about it.

We have influenced certain elements in the Mughal art. They are there in the Lahore Fort, in Agra Fort, in Delhi Fort, but not many people know of these things. There are many other aspects that need be researched. That is why we should pay attention to the study of Bengal Art.

Dhaka University or any other university.

**DS:** What role can the National Museum play in this regard?

**EH:** A very important role. In fact, I am an old National Museum man so I know that there was a scheme which was approved by the government to open a centre for art history and museology. Seven thousand square feet of floor space was constructed and it is still empty on the top floor of the museum. The idea was this that, with or without the university, the museum should come forward to open a centre for training of in-service people and fresh graduates. These persons could do courses on Bengal art. We need museologists of different categories or levels, mid-level, senior level, junior level. There is no provision in Bangladesh nowadays for studying museology. So in the National Museum we have to take initiative today or tomorrow. This is no substitute of a university department, but this can develop a collaborative programme with the Dhaka University so that, the objects are there in the National Museum, there are paintings, inscriptions, coins, everything in the museum. So if the museum takes the initiative, it is better. So I expect the university would extend its hand of support to this programme. Or the university may take initiative and the National Museum may be used as a practical laboratory. They would give the theoretical lesson and the students would come to the museum to see the things, the sculptures, the inscriptions, for themselves. So, in any case, the university and the museum would have to work together. So the National Museum always has a role to play here.

**DS:** When you were the Director General of the museum, wouldn't it have been easier then to start this?

**EH:** You may question that now, but let me tell you something. You perhaps were a witness to the situation. For the National Museum, we constructed a new building. We were very busy constructing this building from 1979 to 1983. The construction of a museum building is not the completion of a museum building. You finish the super-structure only. Then it takes a long time to fill up properly, to put up a display. Another long period of time. So in my time we completed the building, just made it usable by '83. Then we took several years to put up the display. Within this then from 1985 we plunged into another development programme of Ahsan Manzil. It was to recreate Ahsan Manzil. By the time when I retired in 1991, we were still working on the Ahsan Manzil, so we have very little time to pay attention to this academic aspect. I planned it, but I could not complete everything during my time. I have been retired for the last seven years. I believe my successors didn't have so much on their hands to do. So if they think it is important, they can start it. I had those preoccupations for which I could not pay attention to this although this was my plan.

**DS:** Has there been any contact between your centre and the museum?

**EH:** Well, you have placed a question that may embarrass me and some people in the museum. I will tell you the truth. I invited many officers of the National Museum, including the director general. Nearly six months ago, I got a reply from the Director General that he would be busy in the month of February, that is why he would not be able to join the third international congress of international art. What should I read from this letter? The scholars from different parts of the world could come to Bangladesh, and the Chief Executive of the largest depository of Bengal art materials in Bangladesh said he had not time to be associated with the congress. I cannot make any comment on this.

**DS:** What dream are you pursuing at the centre?

**EH:** Dreams of near future we can talk about. It is not so much of a dream as a programme. One of our priorities is to train half a dozen doctorates in aspects of Bengal Art as soon as possible. It is very urgent. We are a bit impatient. The tragedy is this we are not getting the right type of students to come. People are seeking jobs without the right type of background or qualifications. We need capable boys and girls to come up to study Bengal Art. We are not getting them. I spoke to people who are willing to fund of sponsor PhD candidates for three years or four years, but we are not getting appropriate students. We have one senior research fellow who is a former Director of Archaeology and three research fellows fresh from the university, with Master's degrees in Archaeology and Islamic History and Culture. But they are just doing some research here and we hope that all of them would be admitted into PhD courses. But we need more students because there are various aspects of Bengal Art.

So if you talk about dream, it is our dream, our priority programme, to create certain researchers of our own. They don't have to stay with us forever. After they have done their PhD, they can go to a university or a college or some other institution. The objective would still be fulfilled because they would be trained in Bengal Art so they could continue in their studies or research of Bengal Art wherever they were.

**DS:** Thank you very much for your time.

## The Week in Review

### Slum in Flames

At least six people, including four of a family were roasted alive on Feb 27 when a devastating fire razed at least 6000 shanties in the city's Agargaon area.

Neither police nor fire departments could tell of the cause of fire. However, some slum dwellers speculated that the fire originated from an earthen oven at about 11:45 am.

**11 Die on Highway**  
Eleven people were killed on Feb 27 and thirty injured when a passenger bus rammed a tempo on the Dhaka-Sylhet highway. The victims were the passengers and driver of the tempo. Nine died on the spot while the rest succumbed to their injuries on the way to the hospital. The tempo was going from Baricha to Bhairab.

### Gunmen Kill Teenage Girl

A college girl was shot dead on Feb 27, while her brother received bullet injuries when unidentified gunmen stormed into their residence in Faridpur.

The assailants attempted to kidnap Sheuli, 18, from her residence and held her at gunpoint when her father resisted. When all the inmates of the house combined to prevent them, they opened fire, which left Sheuli dead.

### Polls Peaceful

Elections to 136 pourasavas across the country where held on Feb 23-25 amid a three-day shutdown enforced by opposition parties. Despite the opposition boycott and hartal designed to thwart the elections, the voting was by and large peaceful and registered a high turnout of voters.

### No Scope to Scrap

Chief Election Commissioner Abu Hena said that there is no legal scope for cancelling the results of municipal elections held on the three hartals day.

### Hartal Kills Three

The last day of marathon 66-hour country-wide hartal ended midnight on Feb 25. In all, at least three people were killed and some 250 people injured during the three-day shutdown.

The hartal was called by the BNP, Jatiya Party, Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Oikkyo Jote to thwart the municipal elections.

### Separate Qs for SSC Boards

The 5 education boards will receive separate question papers in this year's Secondary School Certificate examination.

The decision to hold the examination under separate question papers came after frequent incident of question leakage in previous years.

### Oxy Digs Another Well

American oil giant Occidental has started drilling of a new well, Jalalabad -5, in the Jalalabad Gasfield on Feb 26.

They are expected to complete the drilling within 90 days and a German company, Duetaag was exhausted with the task.

### Foreign Secretary Dead

Foreign Secretary Mustafizur Rahman died on Feb 28 in a Singapore hospital.

He was suffering from lung cancer and had gone to Singapore for a minor surgery at Gleneagle Hospital there.

Mustafizur Rahman was known for his honesty and fairness. He was with the Pakistan foreign service in 1964 and served as ambassador to Myanmar, Russia and China.

He left behind his wife, two sons, a daughter and many relatives and well-wishers.

### HC Nod for Bhai

The High Court declared the detention of Aziz Mohammad Bhai illegal and without lawful authority.

Aziz Bhai was arrested on Jan 6 under Section 54 of code of criminal procedure. Subsequently he was detained under Special Powers Act and for his involvement in the murder of film star Soheli Chowdhury and an A-TV case.

He was not granted bail for the A-TV case but not in the case filed under code of criminal procedure.

### EC Sets Up Tribunals

Sixty four election tribunals were constituted on Feb 8 to settle disputes in the recently held pourasava elections.

The EC urged all concerned to lodge complaints with the tribunals within 30 days of the gazette notification.

### No Lead from July 1

The government will import lead-free petroleum from July 1, according to a press release on Feb 28. A decision to impose high import duty on two-stroke engines used in auto rickshaws was also taken to minimise air pollution. "Catalytic converted", designed to free fuels from lead will be made mandatory on buses, trucks and other vehicles.

### Ten Get Ekushey Award

The government announced the names of recipients of the Ekushey Award 1999 on Feb 20, for their outstanding contribution in various fields of national life.

The recipients are: Hasan Azizul Haque (literature), Syed Hasan Imam and Subhash Dutta (film), Aly Zaker (drama), Monirul Islam (fine arts), Husna Banu Khanam and Fakir Alamgir (music), Altamash Ahmed (dance posthumous), ABM Musa and KG Mustafa (journalism), Petronas and BAPTEX joint venture.

Malaysian national oil company Petronas Carigali has expressed its interest on Feb 20 exploring two prime blocks as well as developing the government reserved gasfields in Bangladesh, in collaboration with local exploration unit BAPTEX.

### 1952 remembered

Ekushey was celebrated by paying homage to the 1952 Language Movement Martyrs. As the clock struck twelve, thousands gathered around the Shahid Minar offering flowers to the martyrs and singing Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury's historic song, 'Amar Bhaiyer Rakte Rangano Ekushey February, Ami Ki Bhulite Pari...'.

President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina led the people to the Shahid Minar, barefoot and wearing black badges.

### Minnows Blame the Mighty

Speakers at a condolence meeting on Feb 8 held big parties' hunger for power responsible for political murders in the country.

Speakers, representing different political parties and cultural activists denounced the activities of armed terrorists in the country at a meeting held at the foot of the Central Shahid Minar to condole the death of Kazi Aref.

### Desh Ed Dead

Sagarmoy Ghosh, who edited the much respected Bengali magazine 'Desh' for 50 years till 1997, died on Feb 19 at a Nursing Home in Calcutta.

He left behind his wife, a daughter and a son. Author of four books, *Sampadaker Boithoke*, *Ekti Perker Kahini*, *Param Ramantya* and *Hirer Nakshabi*, he made a huge contribution in the Bengali cultural field.

### Sharif Snubbed on Courts

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif announced on Feb 20 that military courts, declared illegal by a Supreme Court ruling on Feb 17, have been abolished. The Supreme Court had ruled the military courts to be 'unconstitutional, without lawful authority and of no legal effect,' thus sparing the likes of 14 people who had been sentenced to death by these army-run courts.

Sharif, however, promised that 'quick justice' would still be handed out, but through civilian courts.

## Pic of the Week



### Mother's grief

Parvez, the 13-year-old boy wounded during hartal of Feb 25, lies unconscious as his mother prays silently.

—Photo by Sheikh Enamul Haque