



art

# Combining Nostalgia with Preservation of Nature

by Fayza Haq

**S**HAMSUL Alam Azad, who won numerous accolades from his teachers such as Professor Aminul Islam and Mahmudul Haque, Director, of Fine Arts Institute, DU, at the opening of his first solo exhibit at the "Gallery-21", has combined his nostalgia of his childhood at Pirojpur, Barisal, along with his experiences of the destruction of the environment, during his formative years in Dhaka at the Fine Arts Institute, Dhaka, and his present life as an art teacher at the Loreto School, Dhanmondi. Having participated in 21 combined exhibits, at the age of 39. (but looking much younger than his age), he has presented 31 pieces in oil on canvas, oil on paper and mixed-media with remarkably ingenuity and dexterity. Even some of his work with a somewhat tragic vision have been presented in such a manner that they appear aesthetically soothing, and it is only if one speaks to the artist personally, that one can envisage the depth of gloom in his heart and mind. Azad, who won the best painting award from the Fine Arts Institute, DU in '90, has progressed to a mature individual who understands his material, remembers the guidances in his formative stage as an art student, and now presents as superb display of what a mature artist can present for connoisseurs, art-lovers and art critics.

Asked why he had delineated nature repeatedly in works, Azad explains patiently and with spontaneity, "The main source of human life comes from Nature and you cannot deny or contest this established fact. This inspires me to toil and grind and put down my emotions and my sensibility. Again, this brings in happy memories from Pirojpur, and it also provides romance in the far corner of my mind, soul and heart. I am basically a sentimental individual and my concern for my environment emanates from all these factors. When I dwell on the environmental pollution, it is normal, it affects me to the depths of my heart and I strive to something that will capture the imagination of the viewers so that they will spend some time before my works, and this me eventually bring harmony, worldwide, and not in Bangladesh alone, in the ultimate analyses i.e."

Dwelling on the necessary mechanisation and industrialisation for countries the world over, and not just in the east or west, Azad elaborates, "I agree that industrial progress must be there all over, but this should not destroy mankind, flora or fauna — and this, as



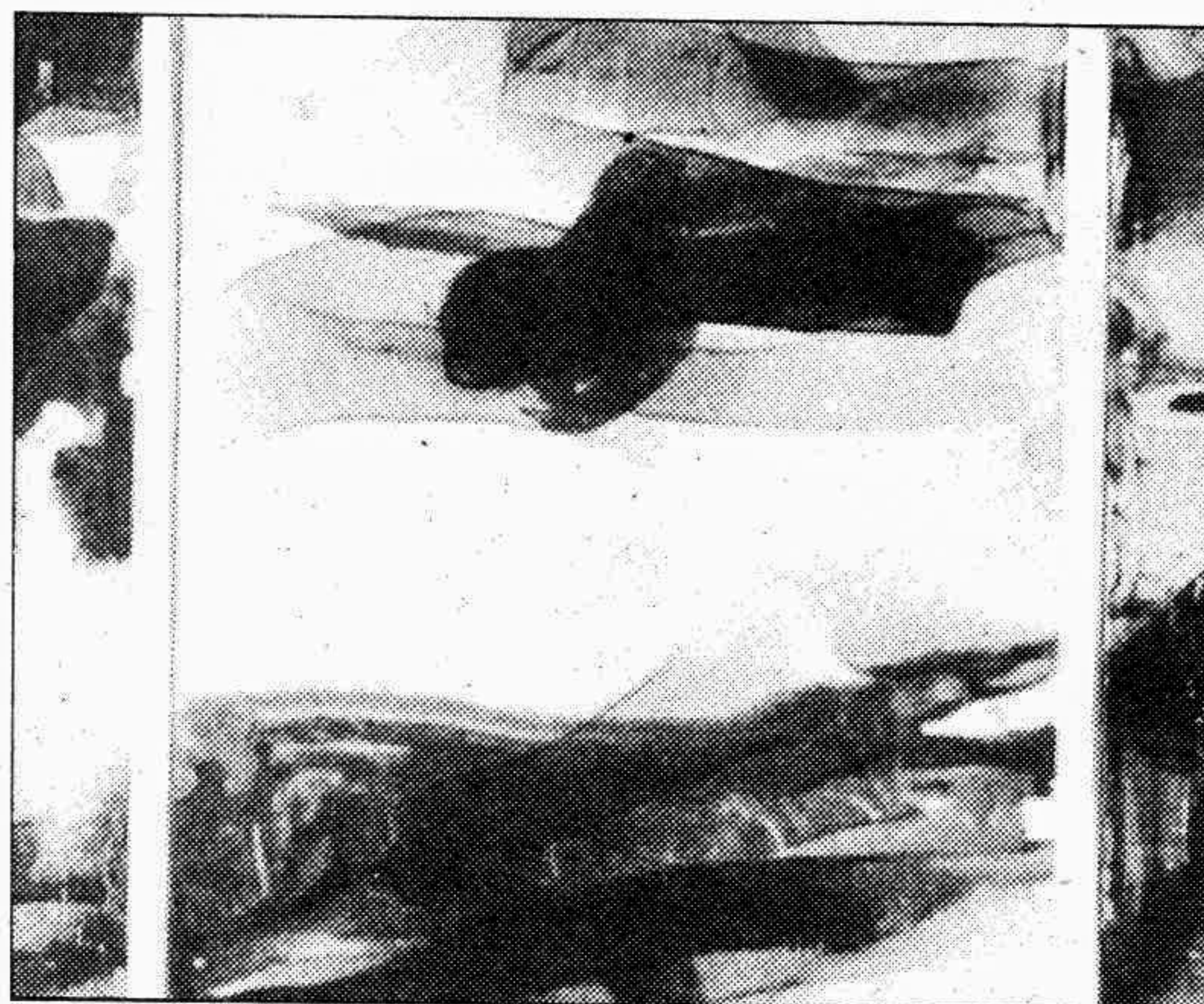
you cannot refute can be done by mankind only. This is a serious responsibility which we cannot shrug off our shoulders. Preservation of environment needs to be done in a more methodical and collective manner — and this is the vital fact that I wish to point out in my works so that they leave an indelible print on the minds of the viewers. In order to save mankind itself, Nature too has to be preserved simultaneously. It is imperative to have a balance of Nature, so to say. You cannot, by any manner, separate mankind from Nature — at least at this present juncture — despite all the outer space and UFO and Extra Terrestrial books and films like 'X-Files' or 'Star Trek'. Yes, man has been to the moon decades ago and have travelled in space, but the bottom line is, that greenery and mankind go hand in hand, and believe me, my vision is also futuristic and not a matter of mulling in the past only."

Dwelling on why he had chosen various mediums, Azad says, "My favourite media remains oil as it has such a vast scope, you can work at will, you can add a delete at will; and after all the great masters in painting in the past all worked in oil, and they have a tremendous impact on my work. Moreover, oil can be preserved longer than any other

media. Yes, you do get satisfaction in mixed-media too. However, I take from Nature to delineate my impressions and views about Nature. Finally, oil is the highest form of art and has the most scope for a painter like myself, in my opinion, and I can best express myself in oils. True, mixed-media and acrylic are also fun things and do suit my purpose, but that is not enough. My intention is to work gradually and think deeply, as I paint."

Asked to elaborate on his sentimental journey to Pirojpur seen in some of his paintings, Azad recalls, "My father was a bureaucrat there, and our house was besides a river where I went boating and fishing by myself. I sang and flew kites along the river banks, at times. Most people's happiest years are those of childhood and they try to recollect them when they reach adulthood, and this brings solace to the mind at that stage and gives a fillip to their existence."

Azad adds, "However, this nostalgia is sometimes a poignant one, as I stayed at Pirojpur till I was 21. My home-town is like a village. Coming to Dhaka in the 80s to study fine arts, I found no 'lines' such as those of the trees at 'home sweet home'. The gentle and soft horizontal 'lines', which I found in my childhood,



Nature Revisited-22, Mixed Media, 1999, 24x8 cm

were massive fields, and rivers. Obviously there were no 'concrete jungles' there. The corrugated sheets of the roofs there also left a gentle impact on my mind as did the shady tall trees back home. The contrasting lines and colours that I found there were minimal. The gentle impacts in my work are that of Pirojpur. And, today, I believe in minimisation of even this lyrical memories. Progressing to life in the metropolis my 'lines' became both horizontal and vertical. However, during my existence in Dhaka, I have never worked with structures, as such, as life in the city gives me no inspiration. Even as a student, my works took their origin from banana trees, and gourd creepers with their fruits and flowers (for which I won an award). I believe that if there were natural calamities or abundant harvests in during an individual's childhood, he/she obviously grows up with their effects. Incidentally, father was the head clerk at the SDO office at Pirojpur and my youthful days were an idyll. As a student at Dhaka, I did get some financial help from the home-front initially, but later I was self-financed by occasional made to ordered portrait, helping well-known artists, such as Mrinal Haque, with commissioned work and commercial

works to which I put my mind to. As soon as I joined my Masters classes, I taught at Loreto School alongside my academic studies. Incidentally, Nasreen Rahman of the Loreto School is the financial backer of my present exhibit."

Asked why he believes in minimisation and why he had departed to abstraction even years ago, Azad replies, "I believe in aiming at post-modern work, and in my paintings you do not find figures as the central focus of my works. When I stand on the ground, there is a relation between the earth and myself. If there are 'lines' there, I find them minimal, while my mind searches for a continued relationship with Nature. If this interrelation is destroyed, everything will be reduced to smithereens, including Nature itself."

In 'Nature Revisited-17', oil on canvas, one detects the skeleton of a tree done in jet-black and flecked with occasional white strokes and dots. Below, one sees a segment of greenery which still prevails, while the sky holds the composition together. "This is a product of my present vision and thought-contents. Here I have aimed at capturing the surrounding beauty of Nature and was preoccupied with thoughts of the necessity for its preservation." Azad explains, "I have tried to bring in the

monsoon season in this with my touches of green, burnt-sienna and yellow-ochre and black." Triangles, squares and vertical sweeps can also be seen. The texture work and the balance of composition has been done masterfully. Asked why his vision has been so pessimistic in this piece, Azad explains, "If you dwell on Nature for years this is the natural consequence. If you attempt to portray the inner self of Nature at this moment this is the true mirror of its condition. There is no *joie de vivre* as man himself is destroying what is essential for his existence. There is recycling and awareness of the necessity of conservation of Nature in the west, but surely that much of awareness is not there so much in our east."

We have another thought-provoking composition in "Nature Revisited-16". This depicts and angry woman, curled up with remorse in the forefront. I believe that women do a lot of agricultural work in the countryside, and are most aware of the need for conservation, which I have harped on repeatedly." The woman is presented in white and even her feet are done in white. She is surrounded by a field of grass studded with tiny flowers, which offset the focal white. "In order to create the necessary barrier between man and Nature, I have put the bar of barred cloud. However, there is Nature here, there and everywhere. This painting presents the agony of women at the destruction of Nature. I also wish to promote the importance of women in our society, as I back the feminist movements. I believe males tend to be destructive whilst women tend to nurture being, gentle in Nature."

The oil on canvas, "Nature Revisited-13" has bright colours taken from Nature. The spheres of tones of the hues are placed in both parallel and square manner. There is a barricade of pitch-black all around. The symbol is easy to follow: the bereavement at the decay of Nature. One sees vermilion, yellow-ochre and sap-green bursting with promise along with a serenading murmuring brook effect, but this is marred with flecks and the outlining broad border. The dots of white, are hardened oil points over which more layers have been put. At times paints have been sprayed on to the canvas.

Going by Azad's present works in his "Journey through Nature" and his serious discussion with its gut-feeling and soul-searching comments and explanations, one feels that here is a talented and dedicated painter who deserves all encouragement and praise from far and wide.

reflection

## Recalling May 1968 and the Agartala Trial

by Abedin Quader

**I**n mid-March '98 I have been keeping my eyes on the newspapers published from Dhaka for commemorative writings on the student-movement in the country but I came across nothing significant. We don't know much about the Agartala Trial except a few vague statements made by some political leaders. Lt Col (Rtd) Shawkat Ali MP had revealed in the parliament months ago that the Agartala Trial was framed by the Pakistan government against Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and some of his political colleagues because of their complicity in precisely mapped out but aborted plan to liberate the country from Pakistan with military assistance from India. I think the political leaders and the army personnel who were put on trial should come forward with facts they know for the greater interest of the national history. After thirty years when I look back through the tunnel of my memory I can still see the anguish-torn Bengalees mobbing newspaper vendors in Dhaka streets every day before sunrise to know about the fate of Sheikh Mujib who was in prison then. At that time the Dhaka Collegiate School had its hostel housed at 26 Nabadwip Basak Lane in Laxmibazar. It was a dilapidated house — decrepit and frail like a moribund patient and symbolic of the fate of the country. I used to live in that hostel, the only student among a cluster of most affectionate and caring teachers. They used to wake me up and send me for the morning newspapers. Groaning and tossing in the bed I could somehow raise myself to throw into a pair of trousers and stroll out to the newspaper vendor in front of 'Ruchira' hotel in Laxmibazar. Every single morning I found the newspaper vendor ringed by a crowd talking about the news of the trial published in the paper that day. It was, to quote an oft-repeated line of Dickens, the best of times and the worst of times for a people who knew that a

When the traditionally brutal French riot police attacked a student demonstration, the students set up barricades and tore up the cobblestones of Paris to use as missiles. For a whole month, the city smelled of tear gas and burning cars. The French communists, members of the most slavishly pro-Soviet party in the Western democracies, despised the student rebels. But when a spontaneous general strike spread throughout France's factories, it looked as if an old theoretical dream of the Left was about to be realized: Two "Revolutionary Classes" — the workers and the intelligentsia — were at last joining forces, and together they would be unstoppable.

severe catastrophe was brewing for them. It was a time when the signs were everywhere of a revival and the eventual birth of a nation. People knew that things were moving towards a showdown, and they pinned all their hopes on one man — Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It was therefore with a great deal of alarm and apprehension that they viewed the Pakistani attempts to strangle the voice of Sheikh Mujib. The trial became a test of both the Pakistani resolve, and the resilience of the Bengalees. Now, after thirty years, when I look back to those days of Agartala Trial event after event flash through my mind. My fatherly teachers of Collegiate School; the Dhaka-air thickened with rumours, tension, anger and wrath, my dreams as a young school-boy, my shivering ambitions to be into a world of political commotion; my habit of burning midnight candle reading novels by Bengalee and European authors — all these images march silently down the memory lane that leads only to the labyrinths of the mind.

2. Similar things were happening elsewhere too, particularly in the West, although differing from ours in inten-

sity and scope. Nineteen sixty-eight was the year of upheaval all over the world. For reasons good and bad, the angry children of the baby boom fought police and soldiers in New York, Chicago, London, Prague, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Warsaw, Tokyo, Beijing, Berlin, and Mexico City. And in Dhaka too.

The nominal cause of many so-called "student rebellious" was the escalating war in Vietnam. But often the violence came out of more deep rooted generational tensions. In some places, riots were sparked when college boys demanded the right to stay overnight in girls' dormitories in the US.

But the student rebellion that really caught the imagination of the world's media and the one that has become the stuff of myth were the Paris riots of May 1968.

More than thirty years ago in a May week, France seemed to be on the brink of revolution and civil war. There had been three weeks of bloody confrontation between students and the police in the streets of Paris, and 12 million industrial workers were on strike. On May 29, 1968, French President Charles de Gaulle actually flew to an army base in Germany to see if the military would

back him up with an attack on the capital.

In the end, a military intervention wasn't necessary. De Gaulle's government promised to raise the industrial minimum wage, and suddenly what looked like a revolutionary general strike was over. It soon became clear to everyone that the striking workers and the students weren't fighting for the same things after all.

It has all begun with a student strike against the appalling overcrowding on the Nanterre campus of Paris University. But France's students were calling for cultural changes in a society that was far more hierarchical and conservative than the US or Great Britain. Hence their jokey slogans like "Be realistic — demand the impossible" and "I am a Marxist of the Groucho Tendency."

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student rebels. But when a spontaneous general strike spread throughout France's factories, it looked as if an old theoretical dream of the Left was about to be realized: Two "Revolutionary Classes" — the workers and the intelligentsia — were at last joining forces, and together they would be unstoppable.

As usual, the Communists undertook nothing. An election called soon after the streets had been cleared, gave a landslide to de Gaulle, and even though he resigned in 1969, the right remained in power for the next 13 years. Although young leftists the world over made a romantic fetish of the "events of May," it was in fact the end of a pipedream that had begun to take shape during the original French Revolution of 1789-95.

American students also were engaged in campus protests in the spring of 1968, but of a very different kind. There had been anti-war demonstrations — some of them violent — since 1965. And then, in April 1968, Columbia University saw the very first campus occupation. This event radically and irreversibly changed the way universities worked in USA.

Traditionally, a university administration was in *loco parentis* — and like

most parents, college administrations did not run their campuses as democracies. This was how universities had been organized since the first ones were created in the Middle Ages. Suddenly, though, students wanted a role in running campuses. And tragically, thanks to the occupation at Columbia and those that followed at other schools, they got it.

After 1968, university faculties increasingly gave up their parental role. They started to treat college kids as adults, even as consumers. But education is not about giving kids what they want; it is about giving them what's good for them.

Student power was a disaster for higher education. It led directly to the restructuring of college courses and, worse still, to politically correct witch hunts backed by fearful faculties. Now American students pay unimaginable sums of money to attend schools due to the changes that began at Columbia in the spring of 1968 — which were, in turn, engendered by the Prague uprising in quest for freedom. The Prague Spring was crushed by Soviet tanks, but now Prague is free — and the Czech Republic is part of NATO.

The Prague Spring should long live in the memory as a triumph of the human spirit. The other upheavals of 1968 are best forgotten.

3. But the sacrifice of Sheikh Mujib and the indomitable courage of the people of Bangladesh cannot be forgotten so easily. I don't know what Matia Chowdhury or Tofail Ahmed now think about the legacy of the 1968 student movement they once organized with life-and-death-promises and determination, but those most memorable days of the nation, the most significant trial against a leader who created a new country in world map should be commemorated with greater respect and with bowed heads.

Abedin Quader is a journalist living in New York.