

Face to Face

Qayyum Chowdhury: Paints to Promote Bangladesh

Qayyum Chowdhury has now etched a name in the painters guild of Bangladesh. He has stained many a canvas with his versatile brush receiving numerous tributes for his portrayal of the Bangladeshi green and cultural synopsis. But as **A. Maher** talks to the artist Chowdhury paints a different picture of the man behind the palette.

Question (Q): When did you start to paint? What got you into painting?

Answer (A): I started to paint from when I was in Class VIII and IX. I was probably around 13-14 years then. My father was a Government service holder then and my *chacha* (uncle) was a writer. In our house we used to have lot of reading materials - books, magazines, periodicals - so I got exposed to them from an early age. Now while going through all these I began noticing the various illustrations on the covers of the books, especially the magazines and became more and more interested in drawing. Later on I was trying to copy them and soon started to paint them. My father was another inspiration; he also used to sketch different pictures with the blue and red pens used in those days for official auditing purposes.

There was another interesting turn. In those days there was a publication of a popular monthly detective story series which I was crazy to read. They brought out the series for two years and I bought and read every copy saving my *tiffin* allowance! It was there that I got exposed to wonderful illustrations that really had me gaping. Naturally I started to imitate them and went further and further into painting. This was probably my most important earliest inspiration.

Q: Let me suddenly switch to something a bit more abstract. Why do you paint?

A: Well.... if you want me answer suddenly then I will say it is because I know only this discipline! I know of nothing else. This is what I have learnt all my life, naturally I would do what I know best. If you are thinking about any philosophy, I don't have anything big and deep. Maybe it is to please myself, satisfy myself. A sort of personal fulfillment. But there is a job. Sometimes people are confused. They don't understand the meaning of a painting and it is up to us painters to depict it as comprehensible to the ordinary mind. Personally, I would say that painters have to delve into the deeper

meaning of pictures and scenarios on the canvas. This became more so after the development of photography. This raised a question of imitating. Why should we imitate photographs? We could depict the same scene by our brushes and put a more human centred view, even a unique personal view, to it which photographs cannot. I will give you an example. In the photograph of a tree in daylight there are portions of light and dark areas, where the sunlight falls and in the area of shades. These areas are of different colours due to the light. Now, what artists do is they try to add colour to the "dark" areas as well to give it meaning - something very unique from the human perspective.

Q: Were you ever inspired by any other painter?

A: Yes. I was inspired by numerous painters and also the works of those with creative arts. Michaelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Picasso have all had their impressions on me. At first when I came across their paintings and works, I trembled with nervousness. I thought they (the painters) were some sort of demons! I mean, to me, those pieces could not have been done by any mortal! They had taken the pictures so much under their control. It was so captivating it left me gaping; later on I started to see and understand the strength, variation and quality of those famous artists. In Bangladesh Zainul Abedin and Quamrul Hasan also had considerable influence on me. I was all the more motivated because they were also my teachers during the time I entered their art college after finishing school.

Q: Are you satisfied with the present infrastructure for fine arts in Bangladesh?

A: Well.... yes and no. We need to have much more publicity and awareness. And incentives too. It is true that back in our days we did not have any scholarships or awards for flourishing artists. Now we do. Nevertheless government support is essential and should be increased in the fine arts.

And public places are ideal for promoting such issues. In the developed countries, before the construction of public buildings there are spaces allocated for different types of art-works-statues, murals, sculptures and of course paintings. To what extent do we notice these things here in Bangladesh?

Similar things should be taken up here to promote artists, painters and art alike. Why can't we have pictures of the liberation war on road sides and dividers or at every major landmark? The bureaucratic management should be more efficient. Zainul Abedin had proposed to President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman about such an idea, to send some of his students abroad for sculpture training so they could be the ones to start it. But it was never followed up.

Here I would like to give an example. The arts should be promoted so it is somewhat in contact with our daily lives. On a trip to Moscow I noticed how even the railway stations were full of paintings and art. I would stand and stare at it. There was also a huge project to depict a certain famous war in their history and that was something like virtual reality! A tank would be burning with fire with war-time sounds from the surroundings. But half of the tank was real and the other half was on canvas - you couldn't tell which!

Our present Art Institute is a beautiful place. But there is gross shortage of funding. Amenities have to be improved for up-and-coming artists. Let me ask you something to figure out for yourself....the *madrassa's* are hyped to be abolished, so what can you think about the fate of the Art Institute?!

Q: What is your philosophy? Could you talk a bit on secularism?

A: Ordinary. Simple. To promote Bangladesh. For I think that if an artist is not patriotic he can never succeed. Yes secularism is needed, and I believe in it. Islam

supports it. But in our society there are certain quarters who oppose it and have been selling Islam to

the effect of making profits for themselves.

Q: How do you see our present day painters? Any pointers?

A: A big change has come. Nowadays we see a lot of experimentation, improvisation. Young artists are deviating from the traditional or well-beaten path and trying out newer perceptions. But as with all disciplines, you need to give time and effort. Those who have done so have succeeded. I think of all the arts and media, painting has had a tremendous contribution, if not the most, to society, compared to other disciplines of creativity.

On a positive note, the Asian Biennial Art Festival is a very good thing for young and up-and-coming painters. It gives them much-needed exposure and a chance to go over art of international standards. Similar programmes/events should be promoted by the government.

Speaking of present painters, we cannot also leave out traditional artists who have founded our art culture.

(He takes out a small colourful earth sculpture of an elephant, made by a Bangladeshi sculptor)

Look at this object of art. Can you see how simple it is? When Europeans and people from the West look at this, they are awed. They are surprised at how such a simple form of an elephant can actually be depicted. It is a very important and powerful quality that we possess. But these artists have been on the wane as there has been no patronization and no one has looked out for their welfare.

Q: What drives your brushes? Is there anything particular you are trying to express?

A: As I said earlier, there is an effort to try to bring together the concepts and theories of both Western and Eastern types of art. This is something, if properly utilized, in the lines of originality. You have to be original. I stress on the folk culture in our country. Side by side we also have to be modern. So keeping aware of our culture



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we have to facilitate the transition of tradition into a new medium which comprise of the newer theories and "modern art".

Q: Nowadays its all to do with science, the 21 century is all about technology and the government has been emphasizing the role of the information technology sector. Do you think, in an ever-growing scientific age, the arts might get trodden in the stampede?

A: No. Not at all. You see the main aim should be to be a complete man. You cannot do without either one or the other. There is art in science and science in art.... take for example graphic designing by computers.... the Internet. All these have to be designed by artists and painters. Where do "pop" art and optical art originate from? The preliminary form is given by them. Even in the industrial scale designing is done by the artist - car design sketches, floor plans. In fact, both the disciplines glorify each other. The

development of society has to do with many spheres of knowledge. An individual learns through reading, watching television, live events and seeing pictures. So all these sectors need development. You said something earlier about "cultural invasion". I think that with cultural roots such as ours, and with people who can produce such a simple form of something like an elephant, it is quite impossible to "invade" it. True, we have to strengthen this culture further in the generations to come.

Q: Could you comment on any theory some reputed modern painters follow in their paintings, and if you follow any?

A: Well there is nothing that precise. There is a slight difference in the approach in that the Eastern or Oriental paintings are created by what might be called outlining. A line is first drawn then the object or the space enclosed by the line is filled with other colours. In Western art, the shades and

colours gradually give shape to the line or outline of the object. As for me I focus on our background, culture and heritage, and try to illuminate these in my pieces.

Q: We have come across in the press that it might be necessary for intellectuals like writers, poets or scholars to be affiliated with political powers in order to become established. Is this so in the case of artists - do politics interfere with your community?

A: You see politics here has become a business. For the politicians it is there as a source of livelihood, and everyone tries to bring more into his livelihood. It is not transparent because it has become a primary means of making money. Fortunately in our case politics has not got that much of an influence to interfere with our work. We don't need the patronization of politicians; rather I would think the politicians would need our patronization.

Q: Are there any

restrictions or limitations on art here in Bangladesh?

A: The present trend of paintings and art practiced here most widely do not face any limitation. But those are not the only forms of art. Before I go further let me stress on the literacy of a nation in relation to art. Given the enormous transformations and modifications that are possible on the canvas, you need to have a very good general knowledge and be considerably educated. There are certain forms of art that can easily be misunderstood and have societal effects. One example is that of nude art. An artist may have a nude model for his subject. But you have to be very literate to accept such a concept. Sri Lanka and West Bengal have 100% or almost literacy rates; there such art is accepted and practiced. Saying this there is also a lot depending on the artist - if nudity is expressed as nakedness then it is obscene. There is a difference between nudity and nakedness.

When I Was A Teenager

I spent my early life in Calcutta - the heart of Bengal art and culture, and had the privilege of meeting celebrities like Dhananjaya Bhattacharya, Jaganmaya Mitra, Hemanta Mukherjee, Salil Chowdhury, Kamal Das Gupta, Samaresh Roy and others. So, fascination for music took roots very early in my life.

Fascination flourished into passion and then obsession, making an introvert boy a celebrity. Nazrul Geeti has been life for Khalid Hussain all these years. An assistant professor at the Music College, Dhaka, Hussain consciously tries to maintain a low profile and not quite forthcoming when it comes to talking about his life. Yet, once the interview began, reticence gradually made way for a smooth passage back in time, unfolding an eventful life.

Born in Calcutta, Hussain spent his early life at College Street. His father Munshi Mohammed Sam-suzzoha was a businessman and mother Rahima Khatun a housewife. The second of three brothers and six sisters, Khalid got all the care in the world from his par-

ents, as he was their first son. His ancestral home in Krishna Nagar was named *Kanan* (his nick name), so was one of his father's shoestores.

"My family was religious, yet not quite conservative. Religious practices never really hampered appreciation of fine arts. My mother had a beautiful voice while my father was a natural artist. Perhaps, their silent love for fine arts imbibed in me the passion for music. Nothing would attract me more than music. Listening to gramophone and musical programmes on the radio was my favourite pastime and I took immense delight in singing on my own. My affectionate father would wake me up in the morning playing a gramophone record. This was my favourite wake-up call."

His schooling started in Mitra Institution - a prestigious school of Calcutta. The education system was great with best possible teachers like poet Krishna-dayal Basu and produced students like singer Hemanta Mukherjee, artist Quamrul Hasan and litterateur Ramjan Ali Khan Majlish. Besides orthodox education the school also put

IN CONVERSATION WITH KHALID HUSSAIN

By Sonia Kristy



emphasis on cultural events. Functions and various programmes were held quite often, and Khalid was a regular performer.

Although not the brightest of students, young Khalid was not a truant type. Rather, he would strictly go by the rules. Only once had he bunked his classes to go to a movie in his entire school life.

"Going to movies was one of my regular pastime. Artists like Ravi Roy, Chhabhi Biswas, Sandhya Rani, Nitish Mukherjee were simply out of the world, but K L Saigal was my favourite. So when his last movie *Parwana* was released, I was hell-bent on watching it. My friends simply added fuel to fire. That he acted while he was ill and that he did not live to see the release of the movie, heightened my attraction. So, I bunked school one day and went to the theatre all by myself, bought ticket with my savings and watched it with a trembling heart. It was an one-off ad-

venture. I did not ever try that again. Besides, I did not quite like the idea of doing something without my parents' consent. Even though later my parents came to know about it, luckily they didn't mind."

Khalid became quite a popular singer among his family and relatives. He didn't need to be asked twice to sing and didn't even mind singing a romantic number in front of his father and uncles. Such performance made the guardians quite amused although they never quite entertained the idea of Khalid making a career in music. But young Khalid had other plans. To him, being able to perform as a playback singer was the ultimate goal. And he didn't want to wait too long. Without any formal training, one day he and one of his cousins wrote a letter to artist Nawshad, seeking a chance to perform as a playback singer. After a couple of days of eager waiting, came the reply but their hope and excitement was dashed.

"We artists have to work very hard and therefore don't have the time to answer such childish letters. So it would be appreciated if you don't not bother us again," read the letter.

The experience did not upset his plans. He started taking formal lesson at the age of fifteen when they migrated to Kushtia. There, at first he took lesson from Ustad Abdul Gani. Khalid kept it a secret to his family as he was not sure whether his religious parents would allow him to continue. His *ustad* (mentor) made arrangements for his regular practice in a room behind an auditorium in the neighborhood, which was quite far from Khalid's home. But that was not at all a problem for him. The young music lover was ready to undertake any kind of hardship for the sake of music. So everyday early in the morning he travelled a long way on his bicycle for music session. His family had no idea where he was going as they thought that he had gone out for a morning walk. Khalid even arranged the tuition fee by himself, saving through-out the month.

But when his family came to know about that

they didn't raise any objection, as he had become a radio artist by then.

"My second *ustad*, Abu Bakar Khan, used to perform in Dhaka Betar. Along with him I came to Dhaka for an audition and was selected from 40 to 45 candidates. I still remember the excitement of my first performance. During those days, I used to sing modern songs and my first one was late Azizur Rahman's *Ektoo heshe ekta kotha jaago amay bole*. The payment was not meager either. It was fifteen Taka with additional twenty Taka as travelling expense, which I donated to a mosque fund. Later when we moved to Dhaka, I became a regular artist in the radio and started performing at different functions. My passion for Nazrul Geeti intensified later and from then onward I never looked back."

Khalid Hussain is not too satisfied with the present day standard of music. According to him, most of the artists don't try to go deep. There are some but the number is very few.

"It requires deep passion for music and knowledge of the basics to take music as a career."