

Face to Face

Shishir Bhattacharjee: Within Dimensions of Cartoons and Paintings

by Navine Murshid

ALTHOUGH he is known more as a cartoonist, Shishir Bhattacharjee is a painter and a professor at the Institute of Fine Arts. He was born in Thakurgaon in 1960, a time when people were already preparing for the liberation war. Different progressive groups that upheld the Bengali culture, heritage and tradition influenced his childhood days. They were basically leftists, college-going students who served as role models to the kids of that time.

"These groups acknowledged my aesthetics sense and encouraged me to participate in cultural functions and exhibitions," he said while talking to the Daily Star at the Institute of Fine Arts.

His was a Hindu Brahmin family that harboured high respect for art and culture. In fact, Shishir attributes his inclination towards paintings to his mother. While she cooked she would often take a piece of charcoal from the stove and draw something on the floor. While making wheat bread, she would often take the dough and make a figure or form. Little Shishir often found his mother colouring the cracks on the walls. She would also collect branches of trees that resembled living creatures and found great joy in her findings.

"She probably did not realise it, but there I was seeing and learning. Before she or I realised it, I was pretty good at drawing."

Next to their home in Thakurgaon, lived a pal (member of a lower Hindu caste), who made goddesses like Durga or Kali during festivities. While most children went off to play football, little Shishir would spend time in his house, fascinated by the way the man sculpted the figures. That too had an impact on him, which shaped his life as an artist.

He remembers that many of his classmates drew better than he did. The difference was that after some time, they lost interest, he didn't. Shishir learnt

the magic of perseverance and was thus able to continue with his hobby which later turned into passion. For this he is thankful to the teachers at his school in Thakurgaon.

By the time he was a student of class five, he had become a good portrait artist. His friends would invariably get portraits done by him on their birthdays. This made him very popular and people started coming to him to have their portraits done. This too inspired young Shishir to take up art as a profession.

He came to Dhaka in 1977 and joined the then Dhaka Art College. Paintings of his early days were more photo-journalistic. He liked to portray things as it were, in a more authentic manner. Slowly, he moved on to depict societal disturbances that he felt was inappropriate for a healthy atmosphere. He started to ridicule the follies of the society and instilled in his works the concept of 'laughing at our own mistakes'. His paintings started to carry a message for people from all walks of life.

As a student, he deeply felt the lack of academic guidance, a short-fall in intellectual prowess. He kept on painting, putting his heart and soul in them, but he would often find himself at a loss. He painted, but he did not know what exactly

was it that he was painting. "I was technically correct; I had the passion in me, but theoretically I had no idea what I was doing. It is when I went to Baroda to do my Masters that I realised my drawbacks. A professor there, Golam Mahmud Sheikh, made me understand that creative paintings need learning. It was after that that I could relate to my previous works. It was then that I could put a name to my art pieces," he said.

He has been acclaimed as a cartoonist, thanks to different newspapers of the country. Many are unaware of his status as an artist. After he came back from India in 1987, he felt that expression was suppressed under Ershad's regime. No one dared to speak up. It was at this time he felt an upsurge of creativity.

This is human nature. You want to do what you are not allowed to do. At that time, I wanted to scream out loud. Drawing was my medium. It was then that a group that was bringing out a magazine offered me a job to draw cartoons in their weekly. It seemed like a dream come true at the time. It provided me with the platform to express my anger, my frustration."

He enjoyed what he did and with time he saw the demand for his cartoons rise. Soon he realised that

he would not be able to come out of it, even if he wanted to, because he had fallen into a pitfall he himself created. He moved onto national dailies.

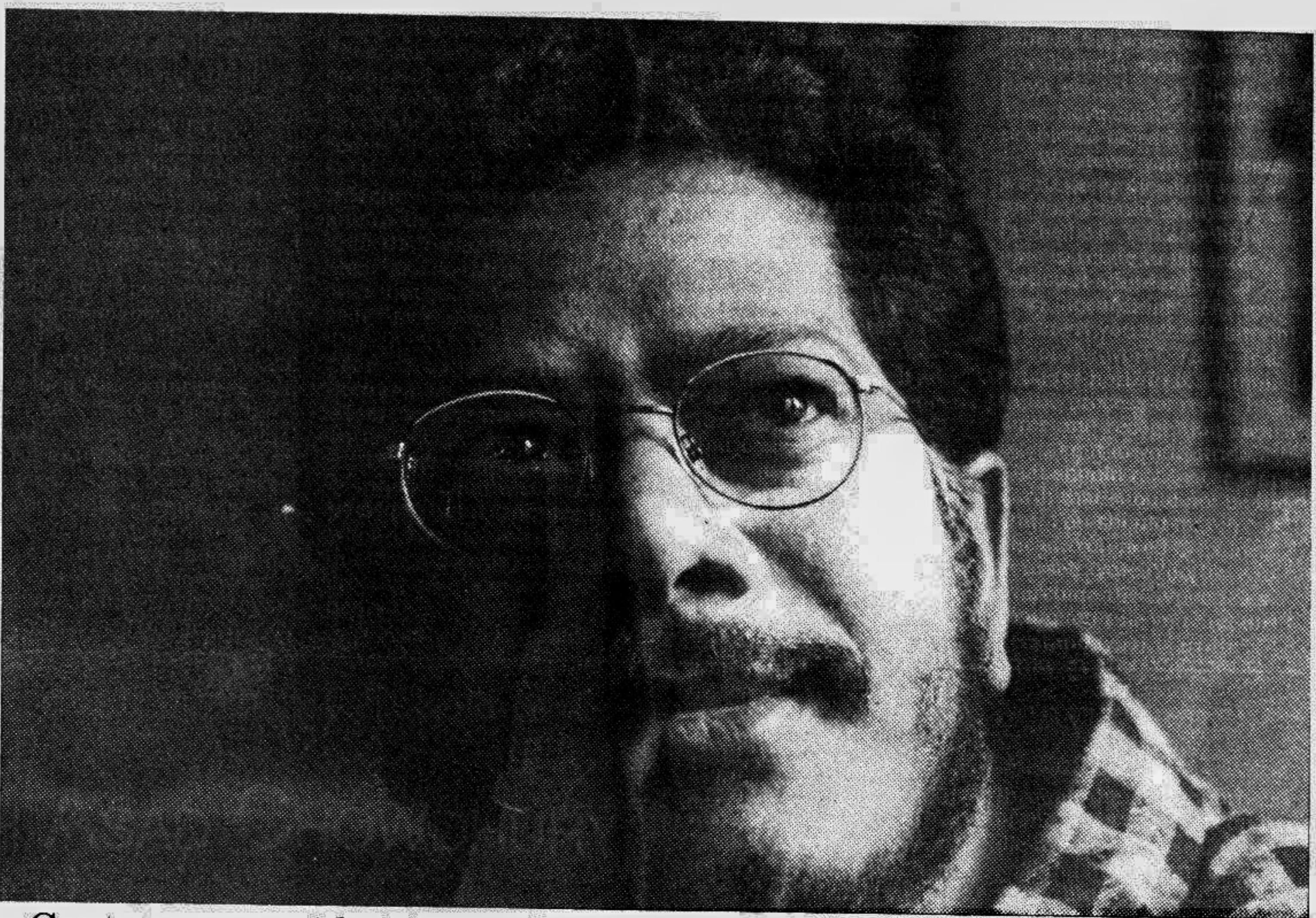
He feels that the inspiration and thoughts behind both his cartoons and paintings are the same. However, his paintings are more personal and they portray a 'multi-dimensional vision'. His paintings provide more freedom and he can experiment with the colours. He does not have to take into account what the viewers would say. It is his own satisfaction that he is only concerned with.

Cartoons provide him a platform of expression as well, but it is more limited, especially because he works for national dailies. He does not have the space to experiment and let his heart rule. He has to be more precise and to the point so that everyone would be able to understand the joke in it. There are also problems because his cartoons may be open to misinterpretation and many may not take it with an open mind. He has to take into considerations moral, conventional, traditional and societal norms. It is also a huge responsibility to speak out as the conscience of the nation.

"There are many aspects of the fundamentalists that I feel is harmful but I cannot bring those in because the readers may not take it easily. The same goes for eviction of the prostitutes from Banbazar and Nimgali. If I criticise the government there would be a negative impact and, even if I want to, I cannot depict events the way I would like to. My reflections have to be in line with the understanding of the masses," he said.

He acknowledges that his role as a cartoonist has given him recognition and an identity. He has been able to reach out to a lot of people and received a lot of appreciation, something that he hardly expected. He feels he is lucky to have found a job which is so close to what he enjoys most: painting. If he did not have this job, he may have been compelled to take up another that was

Photo: Nasir Ali Mamun



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but because this is the way things are."

He also observes that monetary considerations and awards have made the aspirant artists look at their paintings as a means to an end, whereby they will earn money or get awarded for their contribution to the world of art".

However, he feels, it is affecting them in rather indirectly. When they see that their paintings sell, they take so much pleasure in it that they long to establish themselves as artists. "If you want to understand art, you have to study the world around you or the subject with your eyes and soul. You have to be able to feel what you are painting. Today, the involvement and the phenomenon of 'study' is 50 per cent less than it was even in the 1980s. They have the idea that painting is very easy. This could be because 'values' is a very vague term in the Bangladeshi context. A few brush strokes do not make a painting. Although, you need to set your heart free, you should be focused and know what you are doing. I'm not saying this because I'm a teacher,

ings he perceives that his paintings could be said to have the influence of the Expressionists.

Strangely, Shishir has had only one solo exhibition, that too in Chittagong. Art enthusiasts hardly had the opportunity to meet his paintings and verify what they liked best, his cartoons or paintings. To provide them with that opportunity, he has an exhibition coming up in mid-November in Gallery 21, his first ever in Dhaka. With this exhibition he hopes to reach out to those who know him only for his cartoons as well as the art lovers who have been waiting for Shishir Bhattacharjee to hold an exhibition for quite some time now.

"A problem I may face here is that many people will be hoping to see cartoons! I can only hope that they will appreciate my paintings just as much, or

more, because painting is certainly my priority. It is with a lot of love, that I am holding this exhibition."

He has experienced a kind of life whereby he feels that being a mediocre in today's world is worthless. They have caused a lot of problems already.

"Whatever you are doing, whatever profession you are in, you should always try to be the best. You should be able to relate to the international standards and work accordingly. The environment you are working in is not the world. There is a broader horizon out there. If in the process of rising high, fame and recognition comes by, take it in your stride. That should not be the standard; that should not be the end. You should march ahead. You need to express yourself truly. You have to overcome the hypocrisies that often rule you and understand what is truth."

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When I was a Teenager

IT is quite difficult to qualify Asad Chowdhury, for he has varied identity. When asked about his teenage life, the poet and the television personality—Prachchad, the BTV magazine he anchored, was acclaimed in the enlightened circle—started with his signature smile:

"People of this commercial age can never imagine how special those days were. Simplicity and serenity are the key words that made my young days totally different from today's," he said.

Born in 1943, Asad Chowdhury, the eldest and the only brother among two sisters spent his childhood days in the village of Ulania in Barishal. His father, Mohammed Arif Chowdhury was a zamindar (feudal lord) by birth but at heart, he was a politician and a social worker. He was at first an active politician of the Congress Party, later a member of the Muslim League and also one of the founder members of the Awami League. Arif Chowdhury inherited this crave for politics from his mother. Asad's grandmother was an exceptional lady in the sense that during those days of conservative society this broadminded and liberal lady always wore *Khaddar* (a kind of material) to express her blind support for the Congress.

"Politics and social work kept my father very busy and always on the run. This busy schedule made him quite unmindful towards his family. Once, after a

long time away from home he returned with an alphabet book for me. I should have been happy with this gift but I was not. I was a student of class four and was far beyond the alphabet-learning age. My father was extremely surprised to find his son so grown! My family was quite amused at his in-apt attitude."

Asad's mother, Syeda Mahmuda Begum often used to suffer from typhoid and *kalajar* (tropical fever) and the after-effect of these diseases had made her very short-tempered. The children thus always found their mother very much strict and stern. But she was a remarkable woman. She fervently believed in equalism and tried to apply this belief in the people around her. When young Asad once slapped one of their servants, Mahmuda Begum compelled him to taste his own medicine.

"The servant slapped me back and I didn't have any choice but to digest it. I was so humiliated that I even thought of committing suicide! Later I realised my mother's real intention was and my respect for her increased immensely."

The son of this interesting couple had an interesting schooling as well. Asad's education took place in all types of schools. He had been a student of junior madrasa, studied in Aramitola Boys School, appeared for the matriculation exam from their village school and for almost seven/eight months he did

IN CONVERSATION WITH ASAD CHOWDHURY

by Sonia Kristy



not have to study at all. This premature vacation took place when Asad's father was made MLA and they all migrated to Dhaka.

"Our life in Dhaka started in a boat-house at Sadarghat. These boat-houses were called 'pinish' and had almost everything of an average house - bedrooms, kitchen, toilets. But I didn't need all these facilities. What I needed was 'water' and it was more than plenty all around our new resident. Throughout the day, I was found in the water of 'Buriganga' swimming, jumping, playing and nobody forbade me. It was too good to be true for a boy like me."

Although, not the brightest of students, Asad was not a mediocre one either. One remarkable thing about his academic life was that all the teachers, starting from schools to university treated him like their own son. Though in school, the teachers often beat them up, it was not considered anything unusual. What was considered important was their ability to teach and all the teachers of Asad were proven quite skilled in this profession. In class seven his geography teacher taught them to draw maps and in this skill was proven in the matriculation exam

where Asad got seventy-four in this subject.

"As I studied in different types of school, the teachers were also quite different from each other. Once there was to hold a drama in our village and one of my *hujur* (religious teacher) declared that those who are true Muslims should desist from watching it. I, being inspired by this sermon, took the path of being a true Muslim. I was involved in all the arrangement of that drama but ceased myself from watching it. Though inside I was very much depressed not being able to watch it, my father and *hujur* was quite proud of me. Father rewarded me with a taka and *hujur* gave me a lot of *gub* (a kind of fruit)."

Though young Asad was moderately good student and even stood first in the final exam in class nine, it would be fair to say that during his adolescence he was interested in everything except study. One of his favourite pastimes was hanging around the city. When he was in class six, he used to go on ransacking Patuatuli, Shadarghat and other neighbourhood of Dhaka almost everyday. His parents never restricted him or even worried about him. They were satisfied if he returned he returned home within the sunset. And of course, there was the element of trust in their son.

"One day I was returning home from Patuatuli. It was almost evening and raining very heavily. I took a short-cut not knowing that it went

through the neighbourhood of the sex-workers. A middle-aged woman seeing me soaking in the rain took me to her hut, wiped me dry and gave me rice crackers to eat. She was all the time blaming my parents saying what kind of a parent would let a little boy out of the house in that weather. I was overwhelmed at her concern and still remember affectionate voice. From that day, I never ever disrespected any woman no matter who she was."

Despite hanging out, going to movies was another thing Asad was really addicted to. This addiction was so intense that he didn't mind stealing different accessories from the house. "I stole books, cutlery and other stuff from the house; sold those and bought ticket to go to the movies. Once I even planned to steal our sewing machine however didn't succeed."

Reading books were another pastime Asad took great pleasure in. Earlier his favourite was the Benhori series but later he grew taste for Tagore, Sharachandra, Bibhutibhushan and others. When he was admitted to BM College, the college librarian was quite impressed at Asad's reading habit.

His childhood days are dear to him and in this money-hunting world, it is his memories that he finds solace in.

"These days money can buy almost everything but one thing that can never return are those golden days of my childhood."