

## People

## face to face

## "My only wish is to go on painting till I die"

Mohammad Iqbal tells Navine Murshid

DEPICTION of *Sadhus, Sanyasis, Sufis and Fakirs* and the use of bright, vibrant, bold colours brought Mohammad Iqbal the recognition as a promising artist in the early 1990s. Today, he is still learning, but he has traversed odd grounds, he has perceived life and living from different aspects and imprints from his experience with life, from his childhood days reflect themselves on his canvas.

"The reason I depicted nomads and nomadic lifestyles is because being a part of our civilisation, they remain at a distance. We see them on the streets, but we hardly take note," he said while talking to *The Daily Star*. He came for a short visit to Dhaka from Japan, where he is doing a post-graduate degree on Fine Arts, Oil Painting. His first 'real' encounter with these 'outcasts' was in a small village called Beltuli in Commilla. A fair entitled, 'Beltuli Mela', was going on. The *Bauls* and the *Fakirs* sang, they held discussions and hosted a cultural programme. The simplicity of their lives, the serenity in them which is absent in the urban people moved him very much. He felt that there was a certain sadness in them that never found expression. The expression they wore were that of experience, hardship, pain and sadness. His paintings bring out such aspects only too well.

"These people attracted me so much that this was like an obsession. I understood them well; their pain, their anguish found expression on my canvas."

Towards 1996-97, Mohammad Iqbal, found his subject moving towards ordinary people from villages. He started to depict more of those people who are either forced to leave their villages due to land-grabbing etc., and those who leave their villages on their free will. The loneliness, the helplessness of the people found their way on his canvas. Urbanisation and migration of the villagers to the city played a vital role in his paintings.

"Unknown and unimportant faces remind me of the ailments we suffer as a society, as a civilisation." He traces back his interest towards the villages to his school days. Although he grew up in urban surroundings, his favourite pastime was to wander off to the nearby villages. His interaction with nature and 'unknown' faces began then. Little did he know that those visions would one day find expression in his paintings.

Over the past few decades, Bangladeshi artists were able to go to Japan to pursue higher studies on Japanese Government scholarships. Some have settled over there, while some have returned and are doing well here. A witness of the status of Bangladeshi art in Japan, Iqbal feels that our artists have been able to keep up with their Japanese counterparts. The Bangladeshi artists there have carved a niche for themselves in the Japanese art market, and hence are able to lead a comfortable life in an expensive country like Japan.

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"Bangladeshi art is of international standard. The quality of our output in general, is very high. Our master artists can compete with other international master artists any day. To keep up international standards,



Photo: Echo

Mohammad Iqbal feels that at present, the Bangladeshis are culturally very advanced. He remembers a time when people related art with poverty; the time when the only paintings people kept at home were clippings from calendars.

you don't need money. You need to pour your heart into what you are doing. You have to do your best. You have to love what you are doing. And all the artists, today in Bangladesh, do. Very few artists are motivated by money. Very few artists paint for recognition or fame. They paint for love and that is why they do so well."

He feels that the new generation artists are a very bright and promising group. For this he feels that the teachers of the Institute of Fine Arts (IFA) are to given credit. The education and training he got and students are getting today is of a very

high standard. The IFA gives everyone a solid grounding in whatever s/he does. According to him, the sincerity and love of the teachers is the only reason that students are doing so well professionally.

"If I can be called an artist today, then it is only because of my teachers at the Institute."

He also feels that the world has a very wrong impression of the Bangladeshi people and artists.

"What the outside world sees are famines, floods and other calamities. What they don't see is our art, our culture, our heritage. We don't have publications; we can-

not present our positive sides to them-this is our failure. If we compare with India, then we can see that our work or our quality of work is not at all worse than that of India. But they get appreciated by the outside world more, simply because they can present themselves in a proper manner. They don't try to create sympathy, which we at times do. And in doing that, we taste our own medicines!"

With the new generation doing very well, there is a whole breed of young artists who promise to be the masters of tomorrow. One may question whether there are conflicts within these peo-

ple; whether there is animosity; whether there are notions of 'copying' one another's style. Already, there are speculations that some young artists are 'highly influenced' by Iqbal's works.

In this regard, Iqbal said, "No, there is no animosity between the artists. There is competition, of course, but that is healthy competition. Competition that is necessary for the healthy growth of art in Bangladesh. Why should there be conflicts? We are all friends; we all enjoy our work; and we all do our best. I don't know anything about anyone 'copying' my style of work, but if that is true, then I'm flattered!"

Mohammad Iqbal feels that at present, the Bangladeshis are culturally very advanced. He still remembers a time when people related art with poverty; the time when the only paintings people kept at home were clippings from calendars.

"There has been a drastic change in people's mentality in the last few decades. The very people who shunned art before, are the ones who today collect art works with passion. Of course, there are also those who have been collecting art works from a long time now, but for most, appreciating art is a new phenomenon. People are learning to appreciate art."

He feels that emergence of galleries have played a vital role for this. He feels that galleries have opened new roads for art lovers: galleries have provided both artists and art enthusiasts with a common platform, whereby they can interact.

"Even two years ago there were only a few galleries. Today, you hear of galleries coming up everywhere! This means that the art market in Bangladesh is sound. There is a constant interaction between artists and art lovers. This also indicates that people are beginning to perceive art, not only as love, but also as a way and means of life."

So, does this mean that the driving force behind artists today is money and fame acquired through exhibitions?

"Artists do need money. Artists need to sell paintings too to live. But the whole motive behind painting should not be monetary. Paintings come from the heart. When I paint, I don't think whether I can sell this or not. In fact, the only thing I understand then is my art. I don't have time to think about anything else. Once I get engrossed, the rest of the world does not matter too much. I think this more or less holds true for Bangladeshi artists. I don't think anyone can really do well, if he keeps counting his returns."

The future is bright for

this promising, young artist no doubt. He has come a long way, and falls in the bracket of senior artists as well, only because of his works.

Many a time, he had to face reactions like, "Oh, you are so young! From your paintings, I thought you would be much older." Although, such comments embarrassed him at times, this certainly speaks of the level of maturity he has reached at this age.

He sees in his future more paintings, more works. He feels that his one-year-old daughter, Priyan, would be the source of a lot of inspiration.

"My only wish is to go on painting till I die. I still have a long way to go; a lot to learn."



Iqbal at his studio

## When I Was a Teenager...

## In Conversation with Mustafa Nurul Islam

by A Maher

THE intellectual arena of Bangladesh has no doubt given birth to many names that have charmed and took people by surprise. Some of these names have been a bit in the shadows in person, so to speak, while their works have spread across the country in diversified media. Mustafa Nurul Islam is a Professor of Bengali. Outside of the classroom he ranks as a national intellectual, a thinker who analyses the social issues a little differently from the rest. His focus has many a time fallen on the Bengali language, its roots and branches to the dialect of the various districts that

clamped down the younger members; it was always a very disciplined way of life in and out of the house. One characteristic that trickled down from this strictness was an attitude to shun the cloak of aristocracy, or more natively "babugiri".

"We were taught to fend for ourselves and not rely on the servants for everything. Servants were there but I washed my own clothes and did my own cleaning, tidied my room and even helped with the shopping" recalls Nurul Islam.

In the afternoon there would be football matches in the locality and young Islam was an ardent player, but when matches crept into

and changed my outlook on many things. But I could never compete with my father on books; one thing that amazed me at that age and time was how he had memorised the classic 'Paradise Lost'."

Mustafa Nurul Islam insists that the most significant years of his teenage life were spent in the district of Dinajpur. This was also where student politics played a role in his young life. Earlier he was introduced to politics during schooling in class ten. In Dinajpur he enrolled in the G.C. Dev college and took part in organising meetings, rallies and demonstrations. "Getting into politics

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have transformed it.

Mustafa Nurul Islam gained acclamation through the publishing of "Sundaram" a magazine of poems, writings and literary delicacies. Much later on, and to the present, he has hosted a popular talk-show on the intricate issues of Bengali culture. Still going about with a thousand things to do for his age, he is a man pursuing his work with zealous dedication. After a little hunt he gave an insight into the memoirs of his earlier life which shaped much of his future.

Mustafa Nurul Islam was born into the family of a government officer. He was the eldest among 7 brothers and 4 sisters. He says that his was a typical middle-class family.

the evening there would be apprehension. Past that deadline no dinner would be served at home! Regular welts of the ancestral cane would announce infringements on the traditional parental ethics as well.

Young Islam found interest in literature from the environment at his home. His was a household full of books the elder Islam had collected. Indeed it was because of his father that Nurul Islam found the family library so amazing. His father also made him recite well-known verses standing on a stool in the living room and made him read all the classics and pieces that he himself had been handed down over the generations.

But the luckiest part of the younger Islam's literary ed-

those days were a transitive stage in our lives; the national and social atmosphere was volatile and revolutions were taking place everywhere. Since I was a completely new activist in the political arena my ideologies and loyalties were spread and confused. For example, I took part actively in the peasant movement in the rural areas at that time. But then again I was a participant in the anti-imperialist movement as well. So there was a bit of a conflict. Then I didn't realise it."

Their politics of course was a different story altogether from the 'student politics' of today. But,

"The youth are not to be blamed. They have been sucked into something we have, in fact, given to them



Travelling was a routine thing, courtesy of his father. So, before he could settle down to unpack they had changed homes; this exposed him to rural Bangladesh, or British-ruled Bangladesh to be precise, so he terms his teenage

life as one away from the city and having all the essence of the typical village scenario. But that did not mean unrestricted freedom and the luxury to lounge about the village greenery all day. The head of the family had sweeping powers and tough laws were

education was exposure to his father's social circles. Those friends of his fathers' were emerging national figures of the country then, many of them household names in the present day Bangladesh. And these people used to come over and have a noisy gathering with the head of the house whilst our budding intellectual would peer at them and start a conversation of his own with one of them sometime.

"My father made me read Dale Carnegie's book - 'How to Make Friends'. This had a significant impact on me

as a society. They are a hopeful lot, today's teenagers. And how contrasting they are from our times! They have a lot of queries; lot of questions swirling in their heads about how to go about life. And because of this attitude a teenager today would not take everything for granted like we used to do. We led a simpler life but now the situation asks for the parents to wake up to the needs of their wards. The young seriously need the support of their family from the home, and teachers from the academic life."