

## WHAT'S ON THIS WEEK

### Solo Exhibition

**Title:** The Limitless Luminosity of Lines  
**Artist:** Safuddin Ahmed  
**Venue:** Bengal Gallery of Fine Arts, H 275/F, Rd 27 (old), Dhanmondi  
**Date:** June 23-July 13  
**Time:** 12pm-8pm



### Award Giving Ceremony

**Title:** Gane Gane Gunjon Sangbarhana  
**Organiser:** Citibank  
**Venue:** Utsab Hall, Radisson Water Garden Hotel  
**Date:** July 11  
**Time:** 5pm  
Invited guests only



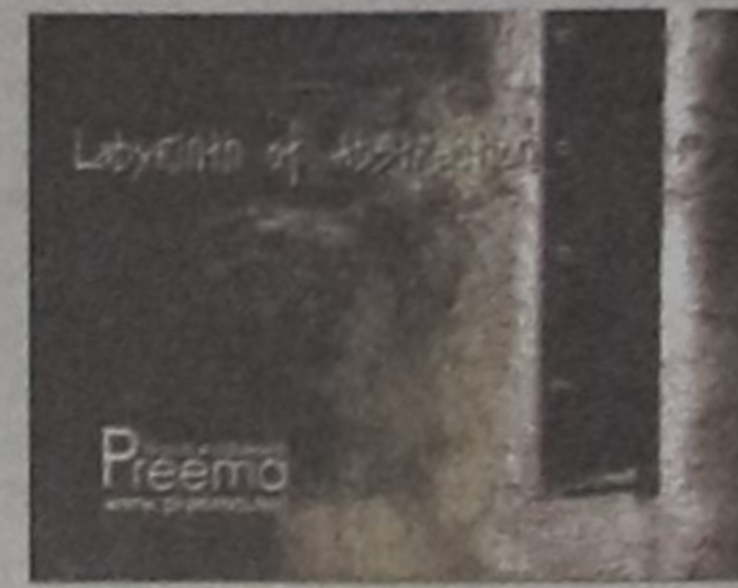
### Film Screening

**Film:** Crime & Punishment  
**Venue:** Library, Russian Centre of Science and Culture, H 510, Rd 7, Dhanmondi  
**Date:** July 8  
**Time:** 12pm



### Solo Exhibition

**Title:** Labyrinth of Abstraction  
**Artist:** Nazia Andaleeb Preema  
**Venue:** La Galerie, Alliance Francaise, 26, Mirpur Road, Dhanmondi  
**Date:** July 3-18  
**Time:** 9am-12pm; 5pm-8pm (Saturdays 5pm-8pm)



## Akramul Islam Popularising the mysticism of Hason Raja

SADYA AFREEN MALICK

Akramul Islam stepped into the spotlight at the young age of 22 with the famous song "Shona bondhey amarey deewana korilo. Na jani ki montra pori jadu korilo," written by the mystic poet Hason Raja. It was also Islam who had composed the tune for the song and it had stuck to the listener's heart since.

Islam had been involved in music even prior to his prominence. He was a regular performer of *adhunik* songs on radio from the late '60s, even though it was no secret that his heart was set on taking the stage through the rich melodious folk music that seemed to have cast a spell on him ever since he first listened to the deeply philosophical lyrics of Hason Raja.

Hason Raja, was born in 1854 to a Zamindar family near Sunamganj, Sylhet. History suggests that much of his youth was spent in materialistic pursuits. After the death of his father Dewan Ali Raja, Hason became responsible for overseeing his family's vast property at an early age. Despite his age, he proved to be a very successful Zamindar, not only in administering the estate but also setting up a number of local schools, religious organisations, and providing for the needy in his community. At this stage, Hason Raja started to shun his worldly pleasures and went into a soul-searching phase. He started to question and search for answers to deeply rooted spiritual ideology. It was this mental awakening that drove him to compose philosophical works of literature that opened a whole new dimension in contemporary thinking.

Akramul Islam had stumbled upon Hason Raja's work almost by fate. It was during the Liberation War in 1971, when Islam met Taimur Raja, the grandson of Hason Raja. The timing coincided



Akramul Islam

with Islam's search for a new dimension in music that he could perform on the radio. Islam's encounter with Taimur Raja seemed almost heaven sent. The mutual respect for folk songs brought the two together, and at one point Taimur Raja lent Islam a book, which contained 191 rare songs written by his grandfather. It was no surprise that Islam found the kind of expressionism he was long searching for and in the time that followed, Islam found his new dimension in music through the works of Hason Raja.

Armed with Hason Raja's literature, Islam wholeheartedly started working to popularise this form of music. He used his new position as programme producer at the Sylhet radio station in 1974 as a

launch pad for his work. The songs, including *Lokey boley boley rey ghor bari balanaj amar; Shona bondhey amare deewana korilo; Ankhi mudia dekho roop; Nesho lagilo rer banka dui noyone nesho lagilo rey*, quickly became very popular across the country even though they were composed in traditional Sylheti dialect. These and many more of the works based on mysticism and spiritual romanticism came to form the bedrock of Hason Raja's folk songs and were subsequently published in his book *Hason Udas*.

Later, when Islam joined the Transcription Service of Radio Bangladesh Dhaka, the erstwhile Director, Shahidul Islam, also a great enthusiast of folk melodies, took interest in col-

lecting the original songs that were fading fast. Akramul Islam in the latter part of his career also travelled to several countries in Europe and UAE singing his favourite Hason Raja songs. But all the effort to recover and preserve the songs went in vain since the spools simply decayed over the years due to negligence by the concerned authority at the radio stations.

Currently, the Vice President of Bangladesh Loko Sangeet Parishad (BLSP), Akramul Islam says, "It's a pity that Hason Raja's work was allowed to deteriorate from the heights in the early '70s when it seemed the songs were on everyone's lips. However we must credit the performers who helped spread Hason Raja's work such as noted singers Ujir Mian, Bidit Lal Das

and Aarti Dhar.

"BLSP, established a decade ago, has been relentlessly carrying out programmes to draw the enthusiasts towards the folk genre. Under the able leadership of Indramohon Rajbonshi, the founding president, several programmes such as songs of 100 poets, participated by 80 folk artists was held last year. This year we hosted the 82nd programme, and such was the popular appeal of the songs that the audience, from all walks of life, wouldn't let the curtains close on the show till the wee hours of the morning," continued a zealous Islam.

Despite the success of the programme, Islam is frustrated at the lack of sponsorship needed to fully support the work of Hason Raja. "As our media sector continues to flourish both nationally and internationally, now is the opportune time to dedicate time and resources into reviving the work of the great poet," according to Islam.

"It's a matter of concern for me that currently in the name of popularising the traditional songs, the use of contemporary beat and orchestration has modified the melody and taken away the original essence of Hason Raja's work. This not only detracts the audience but also weakens the original feel of the songs. Similarly, of the several books published so far on the great poet, not all appear authentic," says Islam.

Hason Raja died in 1922, years before his contribution to the Bengali poetry was mentioned in lectures at Oxford University by Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

In this age of global media, if we want Hason Raja to be once more the topic of discussions, it is up to the current generation of artists and patrons to respect the work of the legendary poet and properly nurture it for posterity.

## Rabindra-Nazrul Jayanti observed in Pabna

AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR, Pabna

Lalitokala Kendra, Pabna observed Rabindra-Nazrul Jayanti with much festivity recently. A discussion and cultural programme was held at Pabna Bonomali Auditorium last Friday. Lalitokala Kendra organised the programme marking 147th birth anniversary of the noble laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore and 109th birth anniversary of the National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam.

Additional District Magistrate, Pabna, Saydur Rahman chaired the programme. Pabna Deputy Commissioner, Khondoker Md. Mokhlesur Rahman was the chief guest. Chief Executive Officer of Pabna Zila Parishad, Sadar Ali Bishwas; Additional Deputy Commissioner, Manik Lal Banik and Managing Director of Universal Group, Sohani Hossain spoke at the programme.

The speakers on the occasion stressed on the need to delve deeper into the literature of



Artists of Lalitokala Kendra, Pabna sing at the programme

Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam.

Speakers shared the view that Tagore and Nazrul enriched Bengali literature. While Tagore's words upheld humanity and soothed the soul, Nazrul's fiery words inspired the nation to confront tyranny and injustice.

The young in the country need to study both poets' works extensively, the speakers expressed.

Later a cultural programme was

held at the venue. Artists of Lalitokala Kendra performed Rabindra, Nazrul Sangeet and dance. Teachers of the institution, Rashidul Hassan Moti and Abul Hashem, directed the programme.

Shafiq Uddin Ahmed, Jannatul Fardaus, Bangkesh Sarkar, Tinni Arif, Sharif, Jayanti and others performed Rabindra and Nazrul Sangeet. Jui, Arpita and Mostafa performed dance at the programme.

## Muslim Institute celebrates Tagore and Nazrul birth anniversaries

AMINUL ISLAM, Mymensingh

Muslim Institute, Mymensingh observed Rabindra and Nazrul Jayanti recently. Marking the occasion a function was held at the auditorium of the institute. The function included discussion, announcement of stipends and a cultural function.

Dr. M Shamsur Rahman, Vice-Chancellor of Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, attended the discussion as chief guest with Advocate A.H.M. Khalequzzaman, Vice-

President of Muslim Institute in the chair. Ratan Chandra Pandit, Additional Deputy Commissioner (Education and Development) was present as special guest.

Dr. A.B.M. Nurul Anwar of Bangladesh Agricultural University and Dr. Marufi Khan, Principal of Shaheed Syed Nazrul Islam College took part in the discussion. Professor Md. Zakir Hossain and Advocate Md. Mozammel Haque, Secretary and Cultural Secretary of Muslim Institute respectively, also spoke on the occasion.

The speakers expressed the view

that both Nazrul and Rabindranath made immense contribution to the field of Bengali literature. Their words are the source of inspiration in times of need.

The discussion was followed by a cultural programme. Artists of Udhichi Shilpi Goshthi and Mukul Niketan Sanskritik Academy rendered Nazrul and Rabindra Sangeet.

Later the chief guest announced 'Muslim Institute Stipend' to five meritorious students and honoured three as 'Best readers' of Muslim Institute Library.

## BUDDHA'S CAVES

Sand is implacable in far western China. It blows and shifts and eats away at everything, erasing boundaries, scouring graves, leaving farmers in despair.

It's one of many threats to the major tourist draw of Dunhuang, an oasis city, on the lip of the Gobi desert: the hundreds of rock-cut Buddhist grottoes that pepper a cliff face outside town. Known as Mogaoku -- "peerless caves" -- and filled with paradisiacal frescos and hand-moulded clay sculptures of saviour-gods and saints, they are, in size and historical breadth, like nothing else in the Chinese Buddhist world.

And Mogaoku is in trouble. Thrown open to visitors in recent decades, the site has been swamped by tourists in the past few years. The caves now suffer from high levels of carbon dioxide and humidity, which are severely undermining conservation efforts. The short-term solution has been to limit the number of caves that can be visited and to admit people only on timed tours, but the deterioration continues.

Plans are under way to recast the entire Dunhuang experience in a way that will both intensify and distance it. Digital technology will give visitors a kind of total immersion encounter with the caves impossible before now, but that immersion will take place 15 miles from the site.

Set between Mongolia and Tibet, Dunhuang was a vital, cosmopolitan juncture on the Silk Road. Because of its gateway position, it was where Buddhism spilled out of India and Central Asia into China, leaving a residue of spectacular art.

The first cave at Mogaoku was carved in A.D. 366 by an itinerant monk named Yuezun who said that one night he saw flame-like lights pulsing across the cliff face and took them as a sign: Here you must



The caves of Dunhuang

stay. So he cut a hole in the sandstone wall and moved in.

The association of caves with religious devotion, ancient in India, caught on here. The earliest examples, small and plain, were used for shelter and meditation, occasionally for burials. They are hard to reach and, apart from archaeologists, few people visit them now. Probably few ever did. They were made for solitude.

Yet by the early fifth century, a cave boom was underway in the Dunhuang area, with activity concentrated at Mogaoku. Larger and larger grottoes were excavated as temples and monastic lecture halls: essentially, public spaces. Many had chapel-like niches and freestanding walk-around altars, all cut from stone. As with the Ajanta Buddhist caves in India, interiors were carved with architectural features -- beams, eaves, pitched roofs, coffered ceiling -- as if to simulate buildings.

Painting covered everything. Murals illustrating *jatakas*, tales from the Buddha's past lives, were popular; they're like panoramic comic-book storyboards spread

across a wall. For imperially commissioned interiors, images of princeling saints and court fetes were the rule. Rock ceilings were covered with fields of decorative patterning to evoke an illusion of fabric pavilions. Any leftover space was filled with figures of tiny deities -- Mogaoku was known as the Thousand Buddha Caves -- painted directly on the plastered walls or stuck on as sculptural plaques.

Sculpture was where Dunhuang departed from the Indian model. In Indian caves figures were chiselled from the living rock. Everything was literally a piece. Maybe because the sandstone at Mogaoku was too crumbly for fine work, the artists here used another method. They made figures from mud mixed with grass and moulded over bundled branches and reeds.

Exceptionally large figures, in need of a solid core to keep them from collapsing, were made in a different way. The body of the 75-foot-tall Buddha in the cave known as the Nine-Story Temple is carved from the rock face and plastered over. His feet are planted at the cliff base; he looks out through a win-



An illustration of buildings from the Infinite Life Sutra

dow, cut near the top.

Of the 800 or so caves carved here from the 5th to 14th centuries, nearly half had some form of decoration. What survives adds up to a developmental timeline of Buddhist art in China, an encyclopaedic archive of styles and ideas, of dashes forward and retreats to the past.

But of course much of it has not survived. By the 11th century Dunhuang's fortunes were in decline. Sea trade had cut into Silk Road traffic. Regional wars left the town isolated. Monks, possibly panicked by rumours of an Islamic invasion, sealed up tens of thousands of manuscript scrolls in a small cave. The invasion didn't happen, but the books, many of them already ancient, stayed hidden and forgotten, as Mogaoku itself was for centuries.

Nature went to work. Sand from the dunes swept into the grottoes. Rock facades gave way, leaving interiors exposed. When people finally reappeared, the damage only increased. In the late 19th century a wandering Taoist priest named Wang Yuanlu settled down

and started a ruinous program of "conservation," discovering the bricked-up library cave with its precious scrolls in the process. He didn't know it, but he had made of one of the most important archaeological finds of modern times.

Other people soon knew. In 1907 the British explorer Aurel Stein arrived. For a pittance he bought around 5,000 silk and paper scrolls from Wang and sent them to England. Some were paintings and banners; the bulk were religious and secular books in Chinese, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Mongolian and other regional languages, evidence of the capacious ethnic melting pot that China has always been.

Of all Stein's books the prize was a ninth-century woodblock copy of the Diamond Sutra, or the "Sutra of the Perfection of Wisdom of the Diamond that Cuts Through Illusion." As if defying the scripture's insistence on transience as the only reality, this marvellous scroll is the earliest known dated example of a printed book, six centuries older than the Gutenberg Bible.

Inside the caves, there is darkness first, intensified because of



An array of painted sculptures

the blazing desert sun. When the eyes adjust to the dusky light filtering in, a larger-than-life fifth century Northern Wei Buddha can be seen. He has a large broad head, soft limbs and a moony smile. Dressed in a hot-weather Indian dhoti, he looks like a giant toddler lost in a world of his own.

Further inside, a small sculptured Buddha backed by a jade-green halo meditates in a niche. A standing divinity wreathed by a garland of maiden angels wears a flower-spattered robe of Persian brocade. Calligraphic figures, blue against white, tumble across the wall like swallows in a wind. Feathered, but with human faces, riding dragon-drawn chariots, they might be immortals from Chinese mythology, though in the flickering light it is hard to tell.

Then they are gone, replaced by court musicians with banjos and flutes. Soon these are gone too. Then a drama in several scenes about bandits being blinded for their crimes and rejoicing as the Buddha restores their sight. Gone. A corps of heavenly dancers, a hundred *Maya Pisetskayas* in *saris*.

China, engulfed in a long period of political disunity and chaos, couldn't prevent the plundering. Finally in 1944 the Dunhuang Research Institute, formed by a band of young Chinese scholars, took control of the site. Now called the Dunhuang Academy, it is still here, stabilising the caves structurally, conserving their sculptures and paintings and monitoring visitor access.

The site has been brought technologically up to date. A one-bare-bones staff has grown to around 300 full-time conservators, researchers, groundskeepers and guards, supplemented since the late 1980s by training teams from the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles, led by Neville Agnew. The ever-encroaching tide of sand has been slowed by a system of wind-breaking nets.

Transportation to Dunhuang has become relatively easy. A new train station has just gone up; the airport runway, once made of tar that was said to turn soft in the sun, has been reinforced. Yet from a plane window the town still has a marooned, precarious look, like a

lone atoll at sea.

In 1980 the caves, or some of them, were opened to the public, although only a trickle of visitors came, most of them Japanese tourists in search of the roots of their own Buddhist tradition. Recently this pattern has radically changed. With a flourishing economy, a relaxation of the Cultural Revolution's disapproval of religion and the central government's strenuous promotion of a new nationalist pride, hundreds of thousands of tourists, 90 percent of them Chinese, are coming to Mogaoku each year, jamming into the caves.

The impact has been significant. The risk of direct contact with art is somewhat reduced by the installation of transparent screens, but the physical degradation caused by fluctuating atmospheric conditions -- humid to dry to humid again -- is acute. Although no one is saying so, it is possible that without major change, all the caves will eventually have to be closed to the public.

Plans for drastic remedial action are in place. The academy will build by 2011 a new visitor reception centre several miles from the caves, near the airport and railroad station. All Mogaoku-bound travellers will be required to go to the centre first, where they will be given an immersive introduction to the caves' history, digital tours of interiors and simulated restorations on film of damaged images. They will then be shuttled to the site itself, where they will take in the ambience of its desert-edge locale and see the insides of one or two caves before returning to where they started.

About 70 percent of the money for the visitor centre -- the equivalent of \$38 million -- is coming from the Chinese government. The rest must be raised from private sources.