

Facets unknown

Murtaja Baseer reminisces about Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah



Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah

TAKIR HOSSAIN

Murtaja Baseer is one of the most distinguished painters of our country, who has made an immense contribution to the

enrichment of our art. Baseer is the son of Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, an outstanding scholar and linguist. The artist goes down memory lane and recalls his relationship with his father, his reaction to Baseer's

decision of pursuing art and more.

"People think that Dr. Shahidullah was against my decision of becoming a painter, but that is not right. He disagreed but never stood in the way. My father simply tried to explain his views to me: 'When I was living in Paris, I witnessed the life of a painter haunted by poverty and pursued by inhumane treatment from his fellow countrymen. The life of an artist is never easy. You are my child. I do not want you to embrace this troubled fate. First, you should complete your BA and MA, and then you can go for art. In fact, I would rather favour you going to Aligarh,'" says Baseer.

He adds, "Initially my main objective was not to become a painter. I was closely engaged to a political party and I tried to respect the party's rules. The Communist Party ordered me to work towards a political organisation. I got admitted to art school. When I was a student of class nine, I became a member of the Student Federation. Then I did many portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and other renowned leftists. When my father observed that I wished to be admitted to art school, he asked me to go to Shanti Niketan. But I did not agree with him. He didn't talk to me for two days and didn't call me to go for prayer either. Then one day he gave me money for admission and called me to his library. There was a mahogany cabinet where he kept valuable books. There were two books, which had colourful photographs of the Louvre Museum. That cabinet was

always locked. I liked those two books, especially the nude paintings in them. I was taken aback when my father handed over the books. In aesthetic terms the books were priceless.

"My father sent me to Italy in 1956 for higher education in art. After returning home in 1959, I prepared myself for a solo exhibition in Karachi. My father was in the Urdu Development Board then. He invited the then Education Minister Habibur Rahman to inaugurate my exhibition and wrote on the invitation card, 'Introducing my son, Murtaja Baseer -- Artist.' American Friends of the Middle East arranged the exhibition. Wine was in abundance at the programme. I felt a little embarrassed at such unexpected grandeur solely on my behalf. At dusk my father chose one of the corners of the gallery to place his *jaynamaaz* for his *Maghrib* prayers. That was a contrasting sight indeed!

"In Florence, Italy, I was included in an exhibition of nine painters from East Pakistan in 1957. A review was published in the *Pakistan Observer*, where I was referred to as 'Murtaja Rashid'. My father immediately wrote a letter to the editor of *Pakistan Observer* pointing out that my name had been spelt wrong. In the letter, he appreciated my works and wrote out my correct name. Afterwards, I changed my name to 'Murtaja Baseer'. My father was much displeased with me. When he wrote to me, he addressed me as A.K.M. Bashirullah alias Murtaja Baseer. He hardly used Murtaja Baseer. Fortunately, he always

treated me as an artist.

"When my father visited our ancestral home in Chobish Pargana (West Bengal), I requested him to buy some tubes of colours, which were available in the shops on Chowrang Lane. He bought those colours for me. In 1961, I was living in Lahore and

with me. Often he asked me to come back to Dhaka and settle down.

"At the end of 1961, I came back to Dhaka and did a solo exhibition, which was organised by the Congress for Cultural Freedom. On that occasion, Bangla Academy organised a seminar on

son is as complicated as modern art to me."

"That night my father came to my room and said, 'Art should be a thing of beauty as I had seen in the galleries of Paris. Why do your works look bizarre? However, I have to admit that one of your paintings called *Dead Lizard*

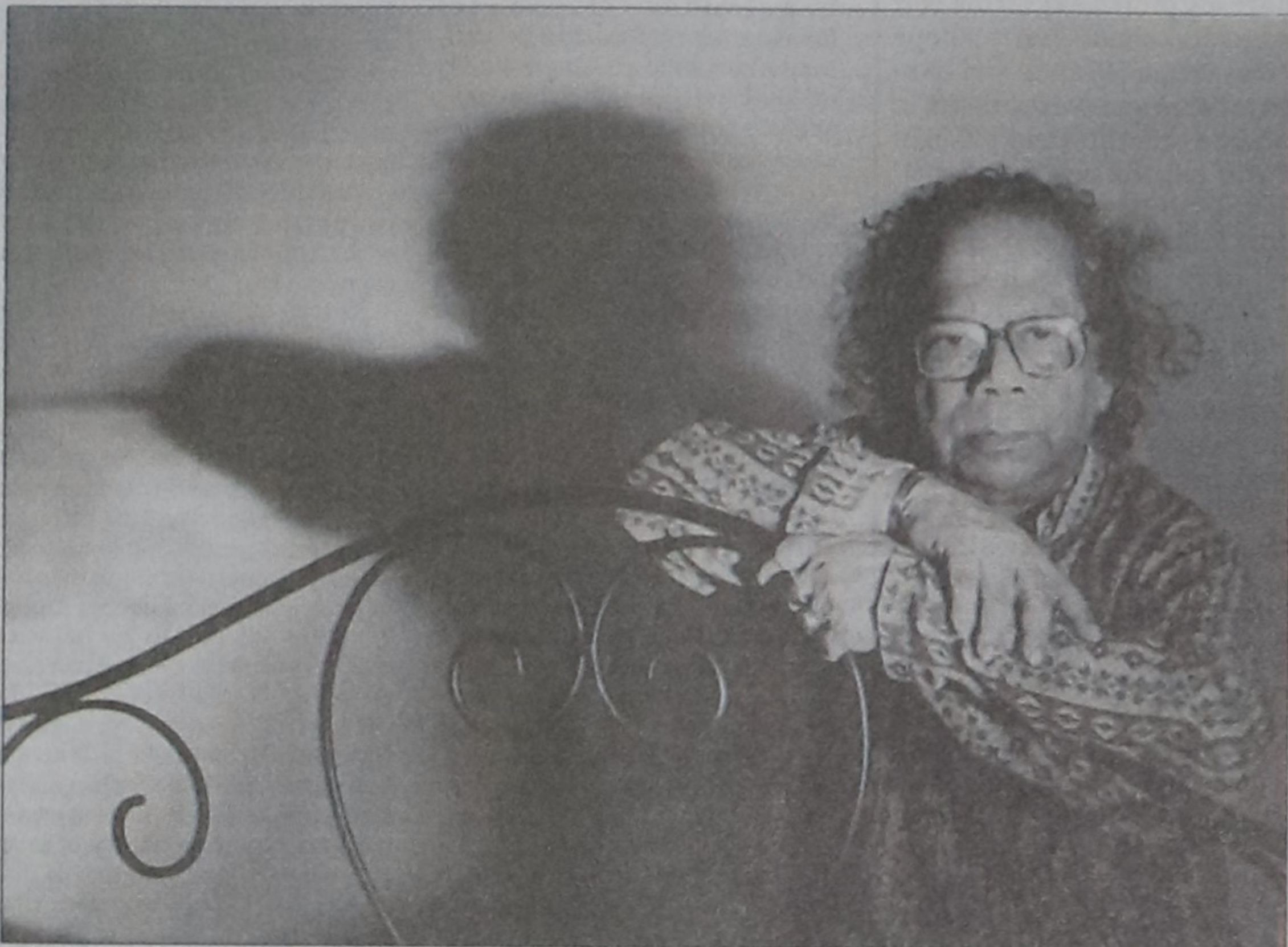
1968, when I was making a mural for the State Bank of Pakistan. My mother had died and I became detached from life and unable to immerse myself in my work. Every day I went to the hospital to look after my father. He wanted to know about my work. When my father heard that I could not concentrate on my work as I was affected by my mother's sudden death, he told me to forget that chapter of my life and carry on with my work."

"One day, Dr. Enamul Haque came to the hospital and my father introduced me to him. Dr. Enamul Haque told him, 'I know him very well. My father laughed and said, 'Yes, my son has now become a famous man.'

"I had drawn lots of portraits of my father, of which he was completely unaware. When my father was admitted to the hospital we didn't think he would be dying after fifteen days. Before leaving for the hospital, he suddenly put on an *achkan* and a fez cap and asked me to do his portrait.

Portraits are supposed to be forbidden in our religion. I wanted to know his opinion in this regard. 'There is nothing forbidden in this regard in our holy book. If the painting puts you in a foul mood or places any wicked impression on your mind, then it is certainly wrong. Such paintings are not even aesthetic in any way.' When my deeply religious father made this statement, portraits were not encouraged in the Muslim world and no faces were seen on a postal stamp. Now that trend has changed."

The writer is a freelance contributor.



Murtaja Baseer

PHOTO COURTESY NASIR ALI MAMUN

requested him to send some canvases for me. He was kind enough to send those canvases to my address. I always informed him about my works and upcoming exhibitions. He always maintained a good communication

'Modern Man and Modern Art'. The chief orator was A.K. Brohi and my father attended the programme. During a conversation Brohi asked my father to comment on me as a modern painter. My father confessed, 'My

really fascinated me.' I explained to my father that this 'dead lizard' represented our decadent society. 'You and I both are meta-physical.' My father agreed with my opinion.

My father was hospitalised in

Old glory in desperate need of attention

Mosques from the Sultanate period in Jhenidah

AZIBOR RAHMAN, Jhenidah

Barobazar in Jhenidah district is famous for archaeological treasures including ten mosques, eleven *dighi* (ponds) and four graves from the Sultanate period. Twelve *auliya* (sages) lived in twelve different bazars in the area. Thus, the area got its name 'Barobazar'.

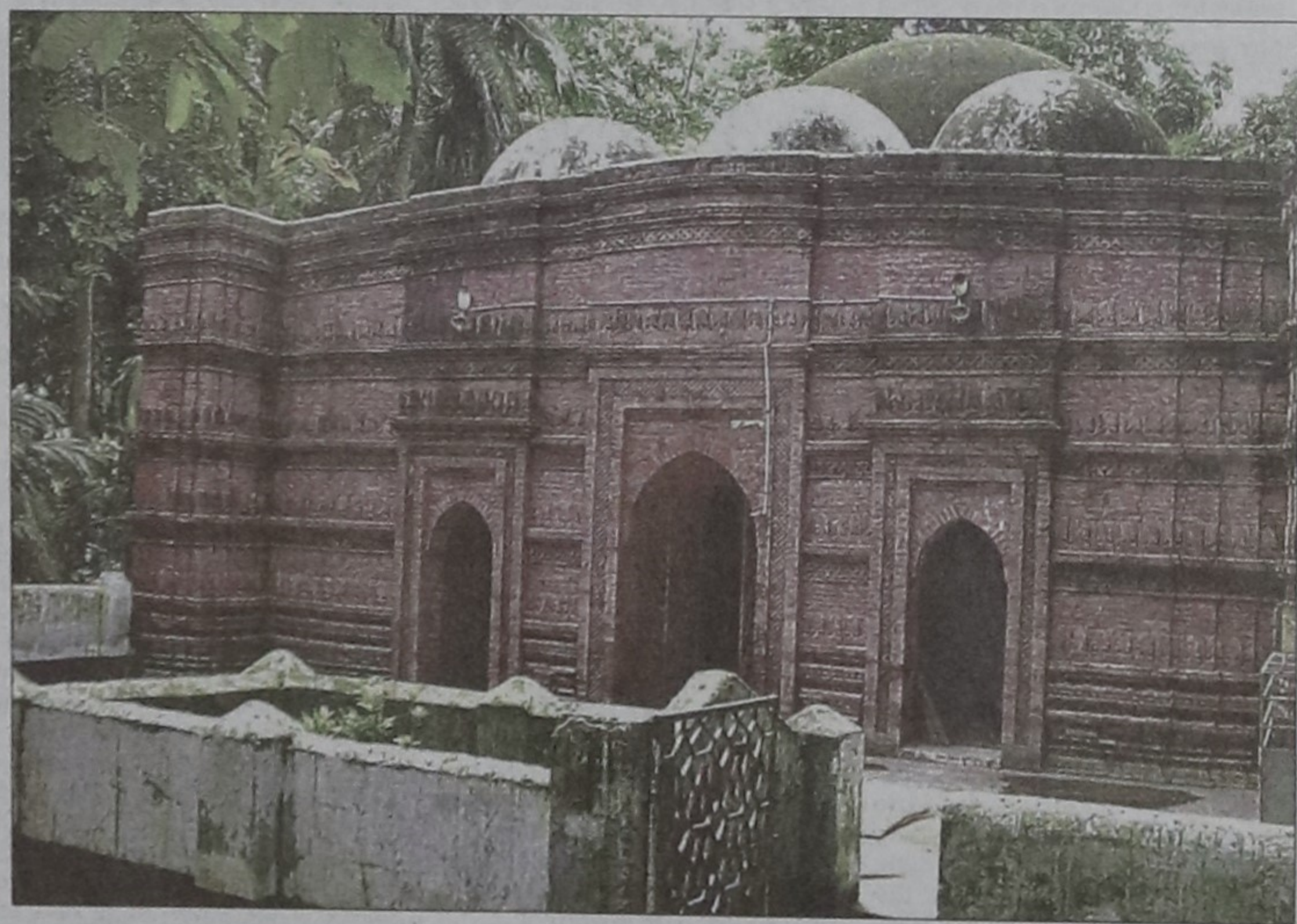
The area is located 11 kms to the south of Kaliganj upazila and 26 kms away from district town. Dhaka-Khulna highway runs through this town.

These beautiful terracotta structures were built during the Sultanate period. The mosques have lost most of their intricate designs due to lack of proper maintenance and supervision.

Although time and nature have ravaged most of the red terracotta plaques on the (app.) 500-year old mosques, the structures bear testimony to the legacy of what once was.

Cracks have developed on the walls. Shrubs and trees have been growing all over the structures. Atiar Rahman, caretaker of the mosques said, a stone inscription was recovered while discovering the Satgachhia Mosque in 1987. "The name, Mahmood Ibn-e-Hossain Saha Sultan Al-Muzaffar, was inscribed on the stone which is preserved at the Rajshahi University Museum," said Atiar Rahman. He added that the area was known as 'Mohammadibaad' at that time.

The mosques are -- Galakata Mosque, Jore Bangla Mosque,



Pir Pukur Mosque at Barobazar, Jhenidah.

PHOTO: STAR

Gorar Mosque, Pir Pukur Mosque, Chiragdan Mosque, Satgachhia Mosque, Shukur Mallick Mosque, Noongola Mosque, Pathagar Mosque and Manohar Mosque.

The *dighis* are called Kharer dighi, Saudagar dighi, Pir pukur, Gorar pukur, Golakata pukur, Jore Bangla dighi, Satgachhia dighi, Khondokar dighi, and Ber dighi.

Barobazar was once an ancient

capital on the Bhairav River. It was the only water route to reach the eastern region from Gaur and Palitpur.

The stones of Shat Gambuj Mosque in Bagerhat resemble these ten mosques in Barobazar. It is believed that these stones were transported by the river.

Eventually, the Sultanate period came to an end and the provincial capital became isolated. In course

of time, these mosques were covered under earth and bushes.

In 1987, Khulna regional archaeological department discovered these sites. Abul Kalam Azad, chairman of Barobazar union said that the roads that lead to the mosques are uneven and rugged. People from different parts of the country come to visit these archeological sites but there is no accommodation for the tourists.

Drama serial "Aim in Life" on ntv tonight



Rawnak Hasan (left) and Mosharraf Karim in the serial.

CULTURAL CORRESPONDENT

Drama serial *Aim in Life* will be aired at 8:15pm on ntv tonight. The serial is written and directed by Masud Shezan. The serial is aired every Saturday and Sunday.

The story of the serial revolves around the eccentricities in a family. Dina, the daughter, considers herself as beautiful as Madhuri Dixit. She is convinced that one film can make her a superstar overnight. Until then she occupies herself with finding flaws of film actresses and taking care of her beauty using herbal products. Dina's father, a retired government

employee, often gets bored with the activities of his offspring. He decides to write a book on the aim of human life. He believes that aim is the main dilemma of human life. As part of the fieldwork for his writing, he starts interviewing people from all walks of life, including beggars.

Mosharraf Karim, Kusum Sikdar, Tinni, Rawnak Hasan and Challenger play the lead roles in the serial. Former National Cricket Team Captain Khaled Masud Pilot, renowned magician Jewel Aich and singer-composer S.I. Tutul make guest appearances in the serial.

A pilgrimage with a camera

Photographs by Tenzing Paljor

KAVITA CHARANJ, New Delhi

Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kinnaur, Spiti, Ladakh and Zaskar. Armed only with his camera and backpack, Tibetan exile Tenzing Paljor has put together a photography exhibition aptly titled, 'A Tibetan Pilgrim -- Travel through the Vanishing Himalayas.' The recent exhibition at India International Centre in New Delhi is a nostalgic look at the Indian Himalayas through the eyes of an exile who has never seen his homeland.

As Paljor says, "The region provides a passageway that allows a person to understand one's roots, despite the distance from the place of origin. Trying to understand the mysteries of this land, many outsiders continue to travel and document this area, but there are fewer accounts from the people of the area itself, something that makes 'A Tibetan Pilgrim' a unique exhibition."

There are other reasons for the term 'pilgrimage'. The Tibetan word for pilgrimage is *neykhor* and it means to circumnavigate around the sacred places. As Paljor explains philosophically, "The intention is less to reach an ultimate destination, but rather to transcend one's mind through inspired travel."

Paljor's photographs capture the struggles, joys and the drastic changes of the Himalayan landscape with increasing globalisation and urbanisation. Thus you have a photo titled 'Sweet Amala,' taken in Alchi, Ladakh. The subject's weather-beaten face makes her look much older than her 70 years -- a phenomenon common enough in the



Red & Blue, Phodong-Sikkim

harsh environs where winter stretches for five long months. "In winter there is nothing much to do and they have to farm and store whatever they can in the spring and summer," points out Paljor. Life is a struggle for the aging woman, as she has to traverse a considerable distance to fetch water from a spring. However, the brilliant smile remains. "When you look at her face you just see this beautiful smile. You can see her contentment with life and her simplicity."

"How Bizarre," with a curious boy looking at a camera, is another eye catcher. This photograph is

taken at a very remote monastery in Karsha, Zaskar. The boy had come to attend the ritual festival of Cham, a monastic ritual dance with masks. As tourists flocked to the venue to catch a glimpse of the festival, they put up a camera. The boy is both intrigued and fearful about this alien object.

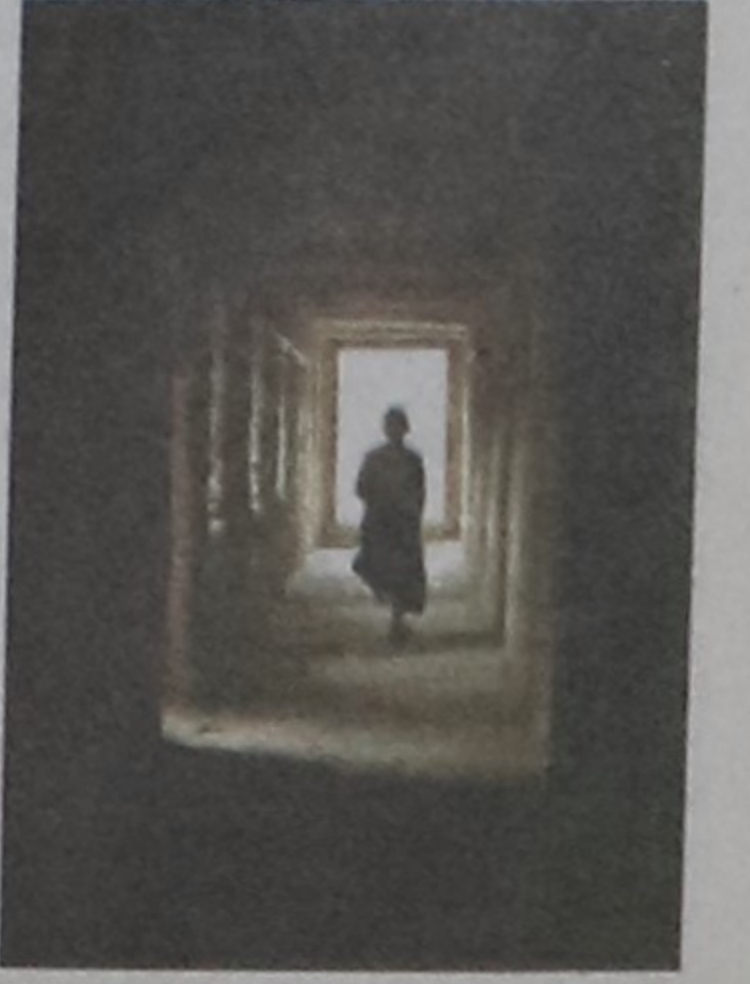
You also have 'Karma Kola' from Goom, Darjeeling. Here you see a society in transition: up front is a wandering mendicant, complete with prayer beads. Paradoxically, at the backdrop is an ad for Coca Cola. Here Paljor zooms in on the changing face of the Indian Himalayas where tourism and global warming have altered the landscape forever. "In some of the areas the houses are made out of traditional mud, brick and straw. Now with global warming, you are getting more rain. How then can you sustain a mud house? So people are putting up modern, concrete, ugly buildings in the name of modernity."

Then you have several paintings of the monasteries in the region, including Phuktal in Zaskar. The remote monastery tests many a visitor's stamina -- it is a 12 hour walk from the nearest road -- and is believed to date back 1,200 years.

The spectator cannot cease to wonder at the painting-like qualities of the works on display -- which

include a superb photograph of the Dalai Lama. Also the messages of globalisation and environmental degradation are presented subtly unlike many other such works which hit the viewer on the head with stills of denuded mountains and the havoc wrought by tourism and modernity.

This year Paljor has continued on his ambitious journey with a visit to the once forbidden city of Lo Manthang in Upper Mustang, Nepal. Next year he plans to take this project to Bhutan, thus covering the entire Himalayan belt bordering Tibet.



Bardo, The Intermediate State



Lamayuru, Ladakh-1