

Two reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

Perspectives of an insider . . .

Days before a mass movement compelled him to relinquish power, General Hussein Muhammd Ershad approached the military establishment for support. He did not ask for such support in so many words, but it was obvious he could look forward to hanging on to authority if his base, the army, agreed to go along with him. It was something of a throwback to the final days of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan in Pakistan. Battered and bruised by ceaseless resistance to his regime in both East and West Pakistan, Ayub in early 1969 wanted the army to help him declare a second round of martial law as a way of clinging on to power. The army did declare martial law, but not before informing the long serving dictator that a new spate of military rule ruled him out as its symbol. The new ruler was to be General Yahya Khan.

Fortunately for Bangladesh in early December 1990, the Bangladesh army not only did not stand beside Ershad but also kept away from coming back to political authority under a new general. That is what you know and that is what Syed Muhammad Ibrahim confirms in *Misra Kathan*. The message to Ershad from General Mohammad Abdus Salam, then chief of general staff of the army, could not have been more unequivocal. In crisp, straightforward English, Salam told the beleaguered military ruler: "Your time is up." It was a sentiment which was also that of the army chief, General Nuruddin, who conveniently stayed away from any meeting with General Ershad in those final days. The soldiers, cognizant of the potency of the democracy movement in the country, wanted no part in anything that would go against the aspirations of the people.

Ibrahim's account, and not just of the twilight days of the Ershad regime, is fundamentally an insider's recalling of feelings as they shaped up in the army. He was in the army and from that advantageous position was privy to a pretty large number of significant events, many of which had to do with the seizure of political power or a loss of it. Ershad's explanations, a few days after his coup d'etat of March 1982, before military officers of why he needed to take power were once again a reminder of the way minds in ambitious soldiers worked. Ershad told the officers that President Abdus Sattar, elected only three months earlier, had asked him to take over because of a deteriorating political situation. It was a lie and yet he glibly told the officers that the responsibility of running the state had been forced on him.

Misra Kathan, from one point of view, is an exercise in autobiographical writing by General Ibrahim. And yet from another point of view it is a record of politics that has defined Bangladesh since its liberation in 1971. Having been part of the military presence in the troubled Chittagong Hill Tracts in a command position, Ibrahim has his facts intact. A fairly



Misra Kathan
Maj. Gen. Syed Muhammad Ibrahim
Bir Protik
Ananya

detailed exposition of the CHT situation --- its background, history, impact --- is thus quite natural to expect from him. And he satisfies such a yearning through taking the reader back to the Pakistan era when the idea of the Karnaphuli dam was first mooted. Ah, but wait! Ibrahim brings in a larger picture here. As the reality of Indian partition came closer in 1947, he notes, tribal leaders in the Hill Tracts made it known that they did not wish to be part of Pakistan. They lobbied the leading lights of the Indian National Congress, who promised to look into the demand. Nothing happened. No matter. The tribal chiefs simply put up the Indian tricolour in their areas to make their preferences known. Only days later, soldiers of the newly set-up Pakistan army forcibly brought down the Indian flags and replaced them with Pakistan's. It was the beginning of a crisis that would characterize Pakistani and then Bangladeshi politics down the years. The Kaptai dam led to the displacement of tens of thousands of tribals. Large tracts of agricultural land simply disappeared in the water. Many tribals crossed over to north-eastern India and never came back. In the months leading up to Bangladesh's liberation, some of the tribes openly took Pakistan's side which, as the writer argues, could have been a reason for Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's exhortation that all tribal people become Bengalis. Was Bangladesh's founder being sarcastic? After all, Raja Tridiv Roy had lent support to the Pakistan army in 1971 and had stayed back in Pakistan (eventually to serve as a minister and ambassador for his adopted

country). No one will know the answer, but there is then the historical truth of Manabendra Narayan Larma raising his voice of protest when the new nation's constitution, adopted in 1972, sought to box all indigenous groups in one Bengali nation. "I am not a Bengali. I am a Chakma", an indignant Larma told the Jatiyo Sangsad.

That was the beginning. And conditions were to get worse in the Ziaur Rahman years, with increasingly large numbers of Bengalis settling the Hill Tracts, eventually spawning an insurgency that would go on until Sheikh Hasina's government would reach a deal with Santu Larma in 1997. In a bigger sense, Syed Muhammad Ibrahim's work is a recapitulation of history, albeit in a style that is inimitable in the sense of being spontaneous. His reflections on politics (and do not forget that he came into politics in the charged times of the last caretaker government) are just that, reflections. But they are reflections that do not hint at any pontification. Pretension is what Ibrahim, unlike so many others, studiously stays away from. He dwells on his days in the Pakistan army and subsequently his participation in the War of Liberation. His assessments of personalities avoid the disappointingly subjective and instead demonstrate an ability on his part to study individuals in dispassionate manner. Which is why, despite his disapproval of Ershad's military rule, he generously recalls the fondness with which the military ruler looked upon him.

In *Misra Kathan*, you run into fast-moving images of a mind racing to bring you into the next story. And, despite yourself, you become a participant in the race.

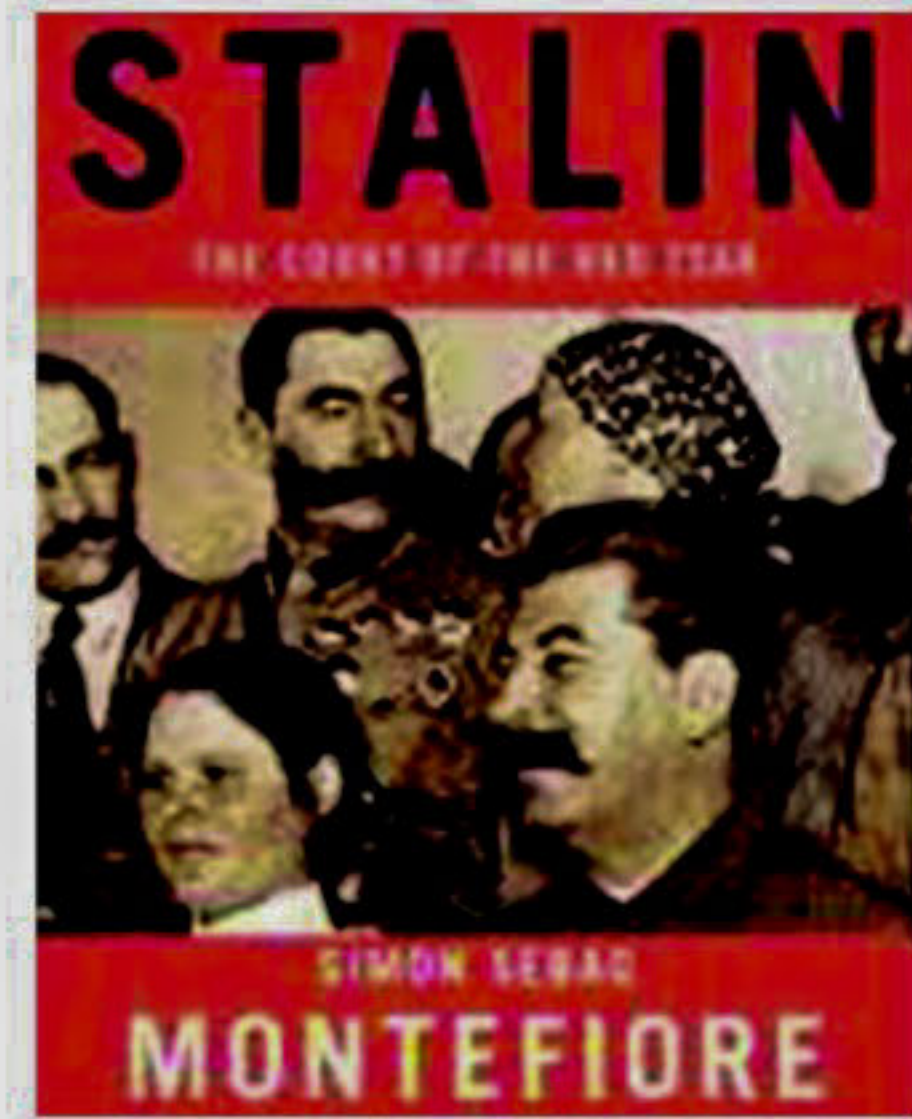
. . . Unreal were the times

For one with a humble, indeed inconsequential background, Joseph Stalin was an intellectually accomplished man. His library was exhaustive and so was his reading. Not for him a mere exploration and propagation of Marxist philosophy. Not for him a rejection of foreign culture as a means of bourgeois exploitation of the masses. He read Shakespeare, went into a deep study of Western poetry and easily threw what he had learnt at his comrades in the Kremlin. At the height of his power over the Soviet Union, he read other people's articles, edited them and made them printable.

That is part of the truth about Stalin. And yet there is the other part, a necessarily cruel one. In the 1930s, as he embarked on a long, ambitious plan to consolidate his authority as Lenin's successor, he was driven by the thought that plots were being hatched all around him, that the fellow communist magnates, as Simon Sebag Montefiore puts it, he was regularly dining with were men he could not trust. It was thus that the seeds of the Terror, which would

effectively begin in 1937 and go on to the early 1940s, sprouted in his mind. Swiftly and without remorse, he would order the arrest and murder of such powerful Kremlin personalities as Kameney, Zinoviev, Kirov, Bukharin and a whole line of others. As his hold over the country grew, Stalin not only provided leadership to the Terror; he came to symbolize the Terror. He had his henchmen invent seditious and scandalous stories about his colleagues. Once that was done, these colleagues were picked up in the night, subjected to days and weeks of torture until they 'confessed' and then dispatched, with generally a shot to the head.

And the Terror was not merely the end of his trusted comrades. It was expanded to include farmers who did not produce crops to Stalinist specifications; it covered Jews (the anti-Semitic was as much a factor with Stalin as it was with



Stalin
The Court of the Red Tsar
Simon Sebag Montefiore
Phoneix

Hitler); it cast its shadows on Georgians, Ukrainians, Armenians, Lithuanians, indeed everyone that the Soviet leader gazed on. Millions were displaced and deported to regions as inhospitable as anyone could imagine; tens of thousands were done to death, the murders being part of a programme to be implemented by regional leaders. Nikita Khrushchev, the man who would denounce Stalin at the 1956 congress, heartily went into the job of carrying out the leader's wishes. Men like Yagoda, Yezhov and Beria, all of whom would reveal their cannibalistic nature through eventually going after one another, cheerfully fulfilled their quota of murdering the 'spies' and 'imperialist agents' Stalin thought were endangering the Soviet state. It did not matter that Kalinin was officially president of the

Soviet Union. His wife was carted off to prison, charged with spying. Even the oleaginous Molotov could do little when his wife was arrested and subjected to torture by Beria on Stalin's orders.

Unreal were the times when Stalin ruled. Anna Akhmatova suffered at the dictator's hands. So did Osip Mandelstam. Stalin's children lived in terror of their father. His son Yakov died gallantly in the war against the Nazis; another son, Vasily, rose to a senior position in the air force but nevertheless saw his life dissipate through unbridled drinking. Svetlana married a number of times and often it was Stalin who decreed who she should be marrying. He was a doting father but was never willing to demonstrate his affections in public. Between the suicide of his wife Nadya and his own death in 1953, Stalin scrupulously avoided getting into romantic relationships with other women. There were the contradictions in him. He could eat a hearty meal even as he knew someone or the other of his comrades was being brutally tortured in prison. Morality did not matter. And yet he ordered moviemakers to abjure passionate love scenes in their films. Passion on the screen was morally repugnant to him.

And there was this huge need in him to be a world figure, a statesman. He felt happy in Franklin Roosevelt's company, but detested Winston Churchill. Yet when the need arose, he could forget his dislike of the British leader and go on to flatter him in unabashed fashion. He was dismissive of Harry Truman and did not get along well with Charles de Gaulle. For Hitler, he had little love. But in the times before the German Fuhrer turned on the Soviet Union, Stalin demonstrated a desperation in his attempts to keep Hitler in good humour. Ribbentrop and Molotov went through a deal, which of course was not to last.

Those of Stalin's colleagues who survived the Terror lived in dread of him. Anastas Mikoyan kept turning up at his dinners despite Stalin's message, conveyed through his minions, that he was not welcome any more. Bulganin never said anything that Stalin did not want to hear. Malenkov was content to be the sycophant he had always been; and Molotov knew he had to be around the Vozhd, as the Soviet leader was known to his acolytes.

In every sense of the meaning (and you have this from an authoritative Montefiore), Joseph Stalin was the Red Tsar. His courtiers did not merely kowtow before him; they knew their lives depended on his pleasure. As Stalin lay dying in March 1953, they restrained their impulse to go for a formal succession. What if he recovered? And, recovering, initiated a new phase of the old Terror that could claim the lives of those who secretly hoped the life would go out of him?

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The languages that are ours

Harun ur Rashid is happy to share thoughts on a work

Written by former Chief Justice and former Chief Adviser of the caretaker government Muhammad Habibur Rahman, it is a pioneering book on the importance and preservation of mother languages.

Justice Rahman is a barrister and earned his second degree in history from Oxford University. Justice Rahman's threefold goals have been to serve his country, to serve his people by administering justice and to uncover the truth. Rahman is an erudite person, a poet and a thinker. His judicial career has taken him to the top; and he has remained extremely influential through his seventy books, including six books of verses, especially as a philosophical advocate of innovative ideas in discourse whenever he has been invited to speak at public discussions.

21 February is not only the Bangla Language Martyrs Day in Bangladesh, but is also observed as International Mother Language Day.

It was on 17 November 1999 that the Paris-based United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) adopted 21 February as International Mother Language Day at the initiative of the Bangladesh government. For the first time, at the call of UNESCO, 21 February 2000 was observed as International Mother Language Day.

The Scottish historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) called language "the body of thought". This implies that if a mother tongue is crushed, thoughts and ideas will inevitably die.

There is a saying: 'Don't judge a book by its cover.' But in this instance this is not correct because the cover and the contents of the book are both rich in style and ingenious.

The book, dealing with the importance of all mother languages, dwells on a basic human desire, that of clinging to the mother tongue from the cradle to the grave. Mother's language is what a baby child communicates for the first time with the mother and the father.

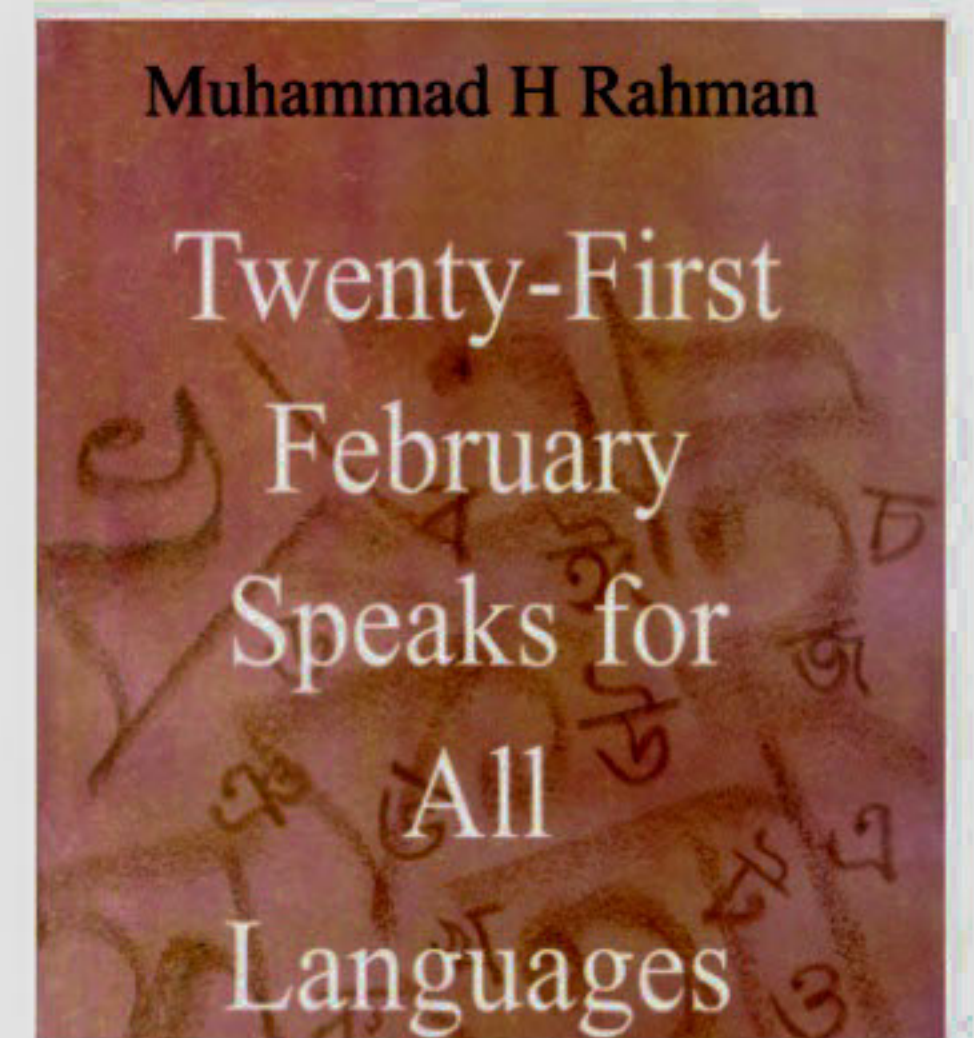
Mother language is what a person never forgets no matter where he lives. It is a prism that determines the first notions of the world to a baby child. The umbilical cord between the mother tongue and thought is inseparable. It is the mother tongue that represents the thoughts, culture and heritage of an individual.

It is appropriate that Justice Rahman, who was among the first batch of students of Dhaka University to march on the streets on 21 February

1952 in defence of Bangla, has come forth with this book. He was once elected vice president of S.M. Hall students' union and has always been an activist for people's rights.

Justice Rahman has first-hand knowledge about what happened on 21 February 1952. He feels very strongly about the importance of the mother tongue in life. The book seems to be the result of his desire to make mother tongues across the world important in a shaping of their lives.

It is a unique book containing more than 150 poems chosen from 70 languages and penned by 140 poets of different languages --- from Spanish to Chinese, from Swahili to Japanese,



Twenty-First February
Speaks for All Languages
Muhammad H. Rahman
Bangla Academy

from Hungarian to Russian, from Azeri to Castelliano-Spanish, besides various languages of South Asia.

The introduction to the book is very rich in content and depicts what language signifies to an individual. Quoting from religious books and sages of different languages, Justice Rahman has shown that there is no alternative to the mother tongue to know oneself deeply.

If one reads the book, one has to go through various translations in English of poems of diverse mother languages. There is a stimulating effect as they include four strands in poems---reflections, impressions, reminis-

cences and glimpses of life and culture of people of varied ethnic and linguistic background.

What a wonderful and creative combination of poems in a variety of mother languages the author presents to readers!

Let me quote an extract from a poem of Lu Chi, a Chinese poet:

"The writer spreads the fragrance of new flowers,
An Abundance of sprouting buds,
Laughing winds lift up the metaphor;
Clouds rise from a forest of writing brushes." (page 29)

A poem in the Azeri language from Bakhtiyar Vahabzade:

"I tasted joy
And unhappiness
With this language.
And I created every poem of mine
And every melody
With this language.

Without it
I am nobody;
I am a lie.
The creator of my work,
In all its volumes and volumes
Is my mother." (page 184)

Another poem is in the Latvian language by Mara Zalite:

"Language, you are a glittering river,
into you I immerse my naked and warm self
caring for the moment,
not understanding eternity." (page 188)

The strength of the book rests on the selection of poems Justice Rahman goes for. He shows how the dynamics of mother languages work through poems of individual poets. Justice Rahman asserts that life and language are coterminous. He quotes a traditional Hawaiian proverb: "With language rests life; with language rests death."

The present title is able to fill a gap in knowledge and understanding of varied emotions of a human being through the prism of mother languages. The book provides insights into the influence of mother languages in human life and presents a wealth of information on various mother languages.

This very reasonably priced book is as refreshing as a new breeze wafting through your mind, taking you into a world far from the madding crowd.

Harun ur Rashid, barrister-at-law, is a former ambassador.

Painting a country's soul

Takir Hossain travels through light and colour

Shohag Parvez, considered one of the most devoted among contemporary Bangladeshi painters, has a zeal for portraying the splendour of nature, serene environment, riverine life, cloudy skies and hilly areas. He believes that we are all part of nature, but some of us closely observe nature with intense passion.

In recent times, the artist has published *Nature of Bangla*, which demonstrates his recent artworks in several mediums and varied styles. There are three articles in the book, one each by noted architect and art critic Shamsul Wares, historian Muntasir Mamun and the book reviewer himself. Definitely, Shamsul Wares' worthy article has added a different aesthetic dimension to the book. Wares has tried to depict the significant aspects of Parvez's paintings and their varied aspects. The critic writes, "Shohag's ability to draw mass, volume and texture and to create sensitive compositions are remarkable. His paintings are fresh, nascent and provide the spectators a sense of pleasure. His drawings and sketches are lively and have the right kind of restraint. He knows where to stop."

Shohag Parvez is simultaneously a water colourist and oil painter. His water colours are superb in terms of his personal techniques and in creating the effects of water. The artist's technique is particularly based on flat wash and thin colour. He seeks to depict the sparkle and simplicity of nature.

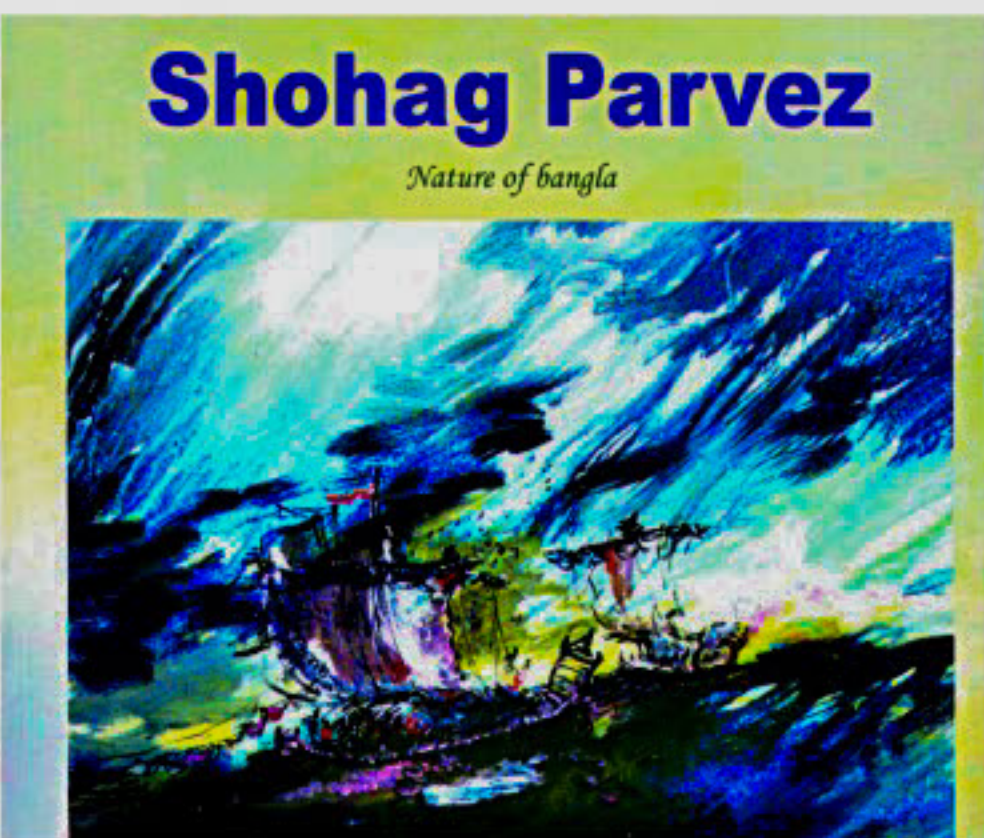
The book is a collector's pleasure as there is a lot of variety in it. The pictures are bright and vibrant, with the book being divided into genres like acrylic, oil, water colour, poster colour, drawing and sketch. On reading the articles, a reader can easily get a clear conception about this earnest painter and his contributions to contemporary art in Bangladesh. The artist has tried to bring all his important works to light in the book.

Shohag began his career as a naturalist painter, demonstrating the panoramic world with its rich abundance of colours, views, light, shade and calm. He prefers seasonal changes, tranquil landscapes, ponds, lakes, mustard and green paddy fields in autumn, rainy days and blue skies. Solitude and serenity are two vital components in Shohag's works. The subjects of his works are in a solemn mood and their characteristics are consistently highlighted.

Lighting is a prominent feature in his paintings and the artist generally prefers incandescent light and mystifying settings. At times, his figures (villagers, farmers and ethnic people) look immobile and impel us into reflecting on their experiences. The painter feels he must demonstrate their everyday woes and bliss on his canvas.

Shohag has delved deep into the ambience of winter and foliage, the beauty of rivers and rustic culture.

Shohag's quiet and profoundly meditative landscape contains a symbolism that alludes to peace and hope in nature. The paintings appear more serene because of its lucid



Nature of Bangla
Shohag Parvez
Computer Graphics Ltd

colours. He produces plain air water colour and focuses his attention on impressive phenomena such as soft light and drizzle, which reflects his detailed study on landscape. His acrylic and poster colours have varied tonal effects, detailing the focus. Azure, emerald green, yellow, black and white are predominant aspects in his works. Villages, ships, boats and villagers' chores have been depicted in his works. His lines are very lyrical and spontaneous. A scrupulous balancing of light and shade is another trait in his works. The painter's works have a pictorial space where boats and ships are immersed in the river and in waterways. His works emerge in lively form.

Takir Hossain is on the Arts & Entertainment team, The Daily Star.