Abedin, SM Sultan and Quamrul Hasan as our guide," he reflects.

In fact, Bhattacharjee's cartoon was a tool of activism during the movement against the autocratic regime of General Ershad. "That too was an expression of my social responsibility as an artist. If I do not have a favourable environment, what is the use of being an artist?" he asks. Starting with the weekly 'Deshbandhu', Bhattacharjee's cartoon began to appear in other weeklies. His political cartoons drew wide attention when he joined the daily 'Ajker Kagoj'. A series of caricature of notorious collaborators was published then in the newspaper under the title 'Tui Razakar' (You are a collaborator). A similar series was published again in 'Bhorer Kagoj' when he joined the daily.

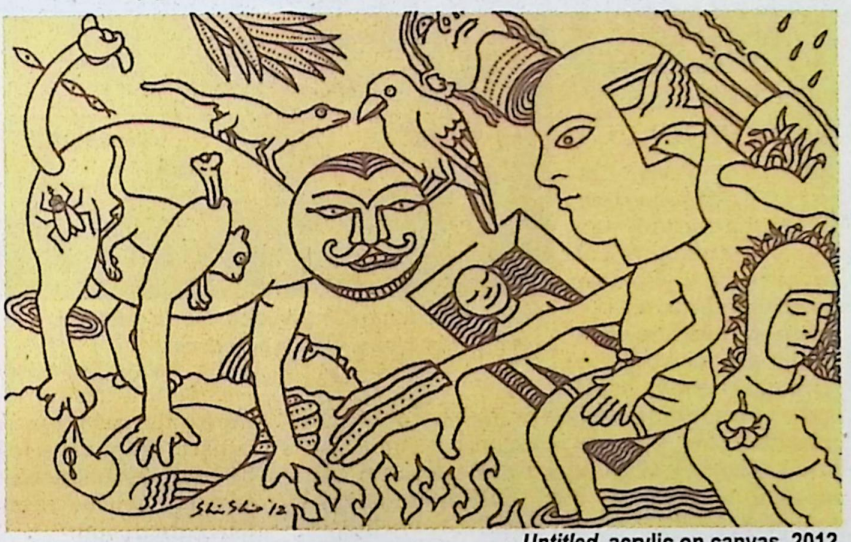
Bhattacharjee who currently works at the daily Prothom Alo, says, "There weren't many political cartoons in newspapers before and it wasn't something regular. But once it became an integral part of the newspaper, its demand rose and newspapers became more popular. I had an obligation of continuing it." Bhattacharjee is not satisfied with the extent of press freedom that should ideally be present in a democratic society such as ours. "Besides, there is self censorship and there are some sensitive issues in which you cannot exercise your freedom fully."

However, comparing the scenario with the 90s he says, "You can draw more political cartoons now. Beforehand, the politicians whose cartoons I drew would get angry. They used to threaten the editor or the reporter. Even I used to get threats. Now a culture of political cartoon has developed." As an example of how tolerant our politicians have become towards this, he says, referring to a finance minister, "He asked, 'Why hasn't Shishir drawn any cartoons about me recently?'"

Mentioning the recent cartoon debacle of Paschimbanga, India, he opines that tolerance towards criticism is almost the same level in all the South Asian countries. From his experience Bhattacharjee notes that it becomes difficult to draw cartoons criticising the government when it is at a vulnerable stage, especially towards the end of its term. "You can draw as many cartoons as you want towards the beginning or mid term of a democratic government," he adds.

Currently, a faculty member at the Institute of Fine Arts, Bhattacharjee points out the need for teaching animation as a part of applied art in art schools and colleges. "Since animation is done in cartoon format that can help in developing a cartoonist." Regarding the demand and status of cartoonists in our country, he says, "In many countries cartoonists are respected more than artists, because they give comments (on social and political issues) on a regular basis." He opines that a cartoon can even substitute a couple of editorials. "Cartoonists are highly paid and respected abroad but here they are treated as minor."

As an artist, Bhattacharjee believes that his cartoonist nature does not directly affect his art work. However, he admits that the fantasy and humour found in his art work could be an influence of his identity as a cartoonist. "Cartoon is a graphic work which has some limitation. It is for mass people. It needs to communicate with everyone. So I have to create the pictorial language after much synthesis. The process of synthesis is a system of pictorial language," he explains adding that this system is useful for his art work too because it helps him realise what he needs to do to communicate the message he wants to portray through his art.



***Untitled*, acrylic on canvas, 2012.**

Referring to his series 'Could have been the story of a hero', 'Come and see the game' and 'The picture' he says, "All of these were done from an opposite pole to that of the usual realisation of fine art practised here. Whether you call it avant-garde or not these were done from a sort of dissatisfaction." This dissatisfaction is evident in most of the pictures in Bhattacharjee's Daag-Tamasha. The tear-streaked dead pigeon or the joyous figures in front of a closed circuit television camera provoke your thoughts. It reminds you that art should not be an escape from reality, rather a media for protest.

Starting on March 14, Daag-Tamasha will continue till March 24 at the Dhaka Art Centre gallery everyday from 3pm to 8pm.