solely works on commissions that he gets from art lovers, who pay him to create exclusive rickshaw art for them. His artworks sell for as much as Tk 10,000, depending on the size of the painting.

"It is humbling to get so much attention from a public that is certainly more educated than I am. The award will not only help to cement my credibility as a craftsman, but will also contribute towards funding the education of my three children," says Islam, who won the Mastercrafts Award for his work in rickshaw painting. While his two older daughters are more involved with their studies, Islam's youngest daughter has shown interest in following her father's footsteps, and learning the family trade. "She has the talent and the creativity. I would definitely like her to at least learn the art form," says Islam.

The Santhal community is a private one, but their creativity is obvious. Painting artworks on the walls of their homes is one way that the indigenous group strives to preserve their unique culture. The technique of this art form is not easy. Santhals grind red mud and rice grains or chalk powder to create the white paint used for painting their houses.

The jury awarded Shankari Tudu of Babudang, Rajshahi for the creative work that she has done on her house as well as her neighbours' houses. Shankari's art is simple in nature; flowers, decorative patterns and rural motifs feature heavily in most of her wall-art. But underneath the simplicity, you can see the innocence, vivacity and grace of rural life. Following her community's tradition, Shankari did not say much when she went to receive her award, and even later, she quietly left the place before anyone had the chance to approach the reticent artist.

Narshingdi is known for the quality of its beautiful hand-woven traditional *taant* fabrics. However, the art of weaving *taant* seems to just survive the advent of time and the gradual increase of machine use to increase production. Most weavers have had to bow their heads to the demands of the digital age, but there are still some who persevere in their attempts to safeguard the tradition of their ancestors. Joynal Abedin of Baradiya, Narshingdi is one of them. Abedin believes that the beauty of *taant* is best explored when it is weaved by hand. "You can see the craftsmanship behind hand-woven *taant*. You can see the difference between machine-made and hand woven fabrics when you search for the details. And that is where the hand beats the machine," says Abedin.

Khadi has its roots entrenched in history. During the movement against the British regime, *Khadi* was the home-made, hand-woven fabric worn to symbolise the boycott of Western products. Even before the partition, Comilla was known for the quality of its *khadi*, and some things never change; even now visitors don't leave the place without the customary purchase of yards of *khadi*. To honour the age-old tradition of weaving the fabric that will always be a fixture in the retelling of our region's history, Parveen Akhtar of Shonaimuri, Noakhali, was honoured with the Mastercraftspersons Award this year.



Rafiqul Islam



Parveen Akhtar

PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

Akthar has such mastery over her craft that she can expertly weave yards of the fabric while having meaningful conversations with her fellow workers. "I work for the Gandhi Ashram Trust, and am responsible for teaching the craft of weaving khadi to thirty other women. When I went up the stage to collect my award, I could hear a couple of my co-workers and my family cheering loudly for me. That, for me, was the proudest moment of my life," says Akhtar shyly.

The award ceremony was replete with a crafts fair featuring original hand-made craftworks such as 'tepa putul' or clay dolls and 'shola' (wicker) baskets. Apart from the fair, the academy and NCCB also organised a workshop with the artists for interested participants from March 8-9.

The crafts and textile industry of our country mark the unique aspects of our national and cultural heritage. It is the hard work and dexterity of our craftspersons that define Bangladesh as a nation that has still held on to its culture and tradition. Endeavours such as the Mastercraftspersons Award assure our brilliant crafters that their work is not going unnoticed and unacknowledged. Now, it is up to the rest of the public to make sure that these national assets of our country are not lost in the hustle-bustle of the fast-paced, modern world. ■