With the support of friends and sympathetic local officials he founded a Fine Arts Institute in Narail. He taught many, of varying talent, often for free. Sultan didn't seek to hoard the value in what his artist's eyes had seen. He wanted to share it. He sought to encourage, challenge and extend: to disseminate the ever present liberation and self-realisation in art.

Not many evenings ago I reached a pleasant flat in the alleyways behind Dhaka's Farm Gate. The location was enviable, featuring an open terrace – rare in the mayhem of the city. I was there to meet 60-year-old artist Bimanesh Chandra Biswas, an ex-chairman of Khulna University Fine Arts Institute and one of SM Sultan's students.

> "When I saw Sultan's hands drawing, it was like magic."

He's not an easy man to catch, commuting weekly back to his Narail home where he runs art workshops for children. We settle in the small living room that features various ongoing artworks – which seem to be the room's real owners.

"What people underestimate," he says, "is the spiritual quality of Sultan's work. I believe he was the Subcontinent's only truly spiritual artist. He had a strong faith."

To illustrate his point, Bimanesh draws my attention to one of Sultan's most famous paintings, First Plantation from 1975. The painting features a very muscular man planting a small tree. Overhead are two angels, alternatively nominated as images of Cupid.

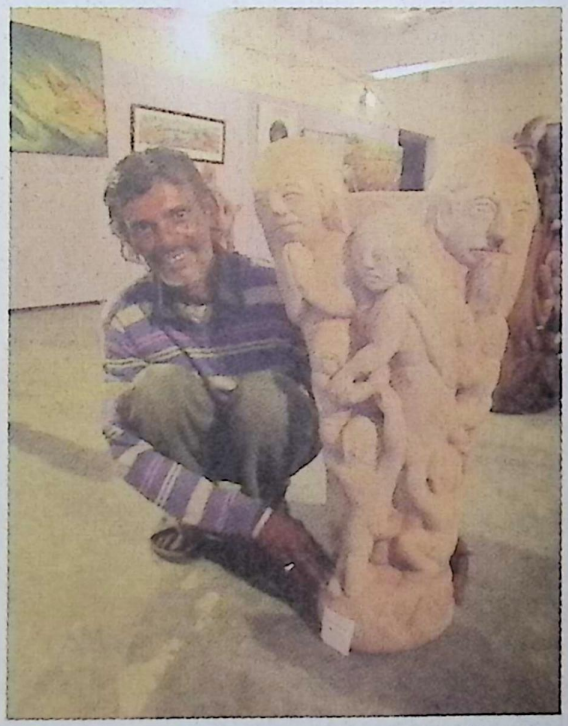
While this painting has been described by research scholar Dr Rafiqul Alam as demonstrating man's power over nature – and he asserts Sultan confessed that he believed in mysticism rather than spiritualism,[3] to Bimanesh the painting depicts the Creator's blessings bestowed upon humankind. In his view, the muscular image of the man arises from the nutrition and wealth represented in the tree, delivered by angels from God. The man's strength is not a power over nature but from nature – how a small tree can make a man big.

Similarly, although it is asserted that the muscular rural figures common to Sultan's work depict the working man as a hero, perhaps as Sultan wished they were and to the point of being a political statement, and concurrently reducing



PHOTOS: ANDREW EAGLE

Artist Bimanesh Chandra Biswas is a former student of SM Sultan.



A participating artist at the SM Sultan Utsob 2014 poses with his Christianity inspired sculpture.