okay – sometimes you will come." Noticing Narayan was older Sultan continued, "For learning there is no age limit. Rabindranath Tagore started his painting addiction when he was sixty."

And when Narayan explained he could not think of attending an art college because his father was just a carpenter, Sultan replied, "My father was a mason. Those who are creating something, they are artists." For SM Sultan, artistic thought and creative act was where merit lay, more than in the created article.

He also said, "If you want to learn art it is like focusing torch light on the night sky. The light will never find a boundary. If you want to learn such a thing, so start!"

Narayan continued to visit SM Sultan as he could, and Sultan sought to encourage him. Upon receiving an invitation to visit Itna, Sultan said if his Narayan Babu and Raja Saheb held an art exhibition there he was sure to be at the opening. As it happened progressive Itna was due to inaugurate their public library and in order to ensure Sultan's attendance the local authorities offered funds for Narayan and Raja to organise their exhibition.

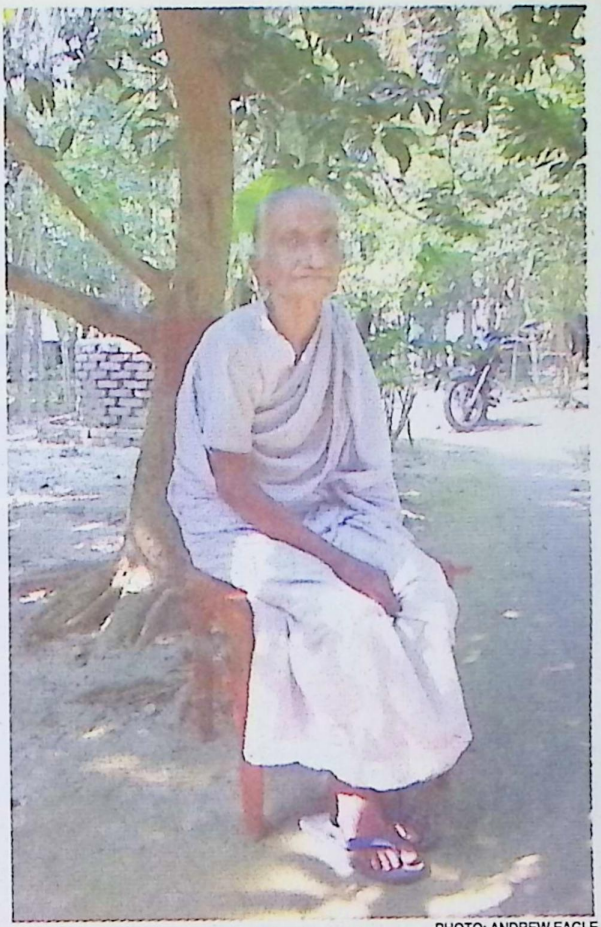


PHOTO: ANDREW EAGLE

SM Sultan, who never married, created a family from those close to him.

On 24 November 1993 SM Sultan took his first steps on Itna's soil. "You see those birds playing? Do you know what it means?" he asked Narayan, "Those birds are ready to receive the newcomer. They are ready for me."

It might be that Narayan's paintings will never hang in a national gallery – but Sultan's song is a cherished gift. According to Bimanesh, Sultan said that if a man had no money or property to donate as zakat he could donate knowledge. And with Sultan's tuition, Narayan was brave enough to paint the image of his mother, who died when he was young, of whom there are no photographs. That is of course, no small thing.

In any case, to be a village artist is not to be less than one Rongolal – Sultan's master.

If ever there was a small town more taken with art and creativity than Narail I have not seen it. With numerous celebrations of Sultan throughout the year and weekly art tuition for children it is easy to say that SM Sultan succeeded in his wish that art should flourish.

And among the participants at the Sultan fairs and exhibitions, if you look you might just spot 80-year-old Niha Bela Saha. SM Sultan made his family of people close to him and Niha became as a daughter.

Although she was not his student, Sultan did not refrain from challenging her. On one occasion he took her to Narayanganj to a festival, and the organisers, on hearing Sultan's daughter was in attendance, requested her to give a speech. Having never imagined she would do such a thing – she didn't know how to handle the microphone or what to say – she was terrified. But due to the crowd's pressure she stood there, and SM Sultan stood just behind her, quietly whispering the right words into her ear. "It was a really memorable day," Niha recalls.

"I never met anyone like him," she says, "He had no pride. Such a good person! Such an artist! There will be none like him." Bimanesh and Narayan would both agree.

There were those who were quick to say that Lal Mia was a madman. It's not surprising for one who did not value possessions or conformity to life's predictable course to be labelled as such. If art can bring the self-assurance of self-knowledge that opens horizons to the broader world, when true caring for humans in general becomes possible: then from the life of SM Sultan we can understand that the true meaning of eccentric is, sometimes, wise. ■

1. The experiences of Narayan Chandra Biswas in this article researched from interview and his book in Bangla, Chitra o Modhumoti Parer Kotha.
2. Details of SM Sultan's life in this article researched from Subir Choudhury (ed), S.M. Sultan, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka 2003.
3. Ibid. p.24
4. Ibid. p.22