

This article was originally written some time soon after the death of artist SM Sultan (10 August 1923 - 10 October 1994) by the well-known Bangladeshi writer and intellectual Ahmed Sofa. The piece offers an interesting retrospective critique on the dynamics of the 'art establishment' then, as well as an insight into the writer's intellectual righteousness – something that Ahmed Sofa was renowned for.

My Heart Doesn't Desire To Speak on Sultan

Ahmed Sofa

(Translated by Shahriar Feroze)

I had once written effusively on S.M. Sultan. Why? Because it seemed imperative to let our 'art authorities' know that he was a rare talent, yet many were unwilling to accept it. Thus, the pen became my last resort.

The reason behind writing was not merely to pontificate that Sultan was a highly acclaimed artist and more. Regarding Sultan, my endeavours had three objectives. Firstly, to establish him as an artist to his people. Secondly, to get him internationally recognised. And thirdly, Sultan was very fond of children and always had a longing to do something for them. So I thought of assisting him in this respect.

1. My first write-up on Sultan had attracted a significant number of art and literary enthusiasts towards the artist. Many of the readers of that piece had even contacted me personally. Among them, I can remember the notable Professor Abdur Razzaq, Poet Abu Zafar Obaidullah, Poet Sayeed Atikullah and banker-cum-businessman Lutfar Rahman Sarkar. It won't be incorrect to imply that it was this first piece that had made this artist known to a number of prominent figures. Sultan and his art were rediscovered by many. There was also a sudden wave of enthusiasm about the painter among the youth. The government at that time came to his aide. The regime honoured him by making him a resident artist, including arranging a regular stipend.

However, it was the young Tareque Masud who had initiated a grand plan: he made a documentary film based on Sultan. And the only source of inspiration to his work was my first write-up. His film titled "Adam Surat" brought the painter into the limelight. Hasnat Abdul Hye went on to write a book on him. In the

book the writer also acknowledged my piece.

In independent Bangladesh there were only two art exhibitions held on Sultan's works. The first one was held at the Shilpakola Academy in 1976 and the second at the Goethe Institute (the German Cultural Centre) in 1987. I made some contributions to the second one.

As mentioned before, Sultan was very fond of children. When he was attempting to inaugurate "Bhrammoman Shishu Shorgo" (a boat for carrying children and help them to draw natural sceneries), I was the General Secretary of a Foundation called "Bangla-German Shompriti". To help him materialise his dream, I amassed around 9-10 lakh Taka from my German trip. The boat was built. I had some further plans with Sultan in his hometown at Narail but due to shortage of funds and other reasons they couldn't be implemented.

There are two more reasons behind the undertaking of these endeavours.

I believed that as Sultan was the son of a farmer, it was this identity that had largely deprived him from the title of an 'artist'. Had he not been the son of a farmer then our art establishment wouldn't have hesitated to give him his deserved recognition. I believe that our art establishment had deliberately deprived Sultan from his due acclamation. Most within the establishment knew that Sultan was a painter of international stature, a national talent who ought to be treasured. So the attempt to neglect him was on purpose. I decided to put an end to it.

Secondly, I too am the son of a farmer. I saw how the son of another farmer was struggling to thrive on his inherent talent, to rise despite the snub of the art establishment. It was then that I had realised my purpose was the same as Sultan's. From the bottom of my heart, I still believe, like the famous painter Vincent Van Gogh – our Sultan too is a painter of world eminence. Within our subcontinent, there's none to match Sultan's calibre. My belief has become further strengthened after my trip to America.

I had heard a number of museum officials discussing Sultan. They seemed very keen about procuring his works. Unfortunately, I had none of his works. If I had any, it could have fetched a fortune.

However, I am pleased that Sultan finally earned himself the title of an Artist in our country. Our younger generation has become aware of his great talent and magnitude. Pity that the painter's generous dream concerning children could not come true till today. The future too can't be predicted. But inspired by him I had started a school. The painter was alive then. He had spent some time in the school with the children. Regrettably, I couldn't run it for more than a year. The Ershad regime of that time forced me to close it down. I was able to reopen it in 1995. I had to appeal for funds to a number of sources and organisations and still continue to do so. I am not sure how long I can continue it.

2. Sultan was a revelation to me. That revelation has yet not ended. Sultan was a sublime source of inspiration. He could inspire the most ordinary person to be creative. In Bangladesh, no other artist is comparable to him. Let's talk about a boat mechanic named Prafulla. Sultan used to stay with him whenever he was in Sonargaon. Prafulla was forty years old then.



He was a boat mechanic as well as a farmer. Sultan wanted to bring out the artist in him.

In response to Sultan's insistence he hesitated, 'Master, how can I become an artist?'

Sultan motivated him by saying, 'You can. I know you can.'

Later on, whenever Prafulla could make time he used to draw with colour pencils on large pieces of paper. Today, if his drawings are seen from a distance they appear like Sultan's. Only Sultan could have set a course of action into motion for such a dream to come true.

According to me, Sultan's paintings have a kind of eternity and brilliance that's seldom found in other artists. Jainul Abedin was also a renowned artist but it is Sultan's universality which makes him comparable to none. In our country, this characteristic is absent among most artists.

We witness consciousness about environmental issues today, but he had markedly emphasised on the issue way back in 1986. I once undertook some initiatives for obtaining UN recognition to brand him as an environment artist. Had he lived a little longer, surely I would have reached my goal.

The reason our governments are compelled to recognize Sultan is because his position is fortified by a tremendous amount of public support. He has many admirers. But I feel that the governments are not thoroughly and consistently sincere in their efforts regarding Sultan. During the BNP regime, the government had allotted him a fund but it was stopped by the succeeding government.

At a seminar arranged by Bengalis in Atlanta, I had met the Deputy Minister for Culture who told me that his government had initiated a grander plan for preserving Sultan's heritage. A committee was formed to monitor a substantial fund. Acres of occupied land were reclaimed despite legal obstacles. I later found out nothing was actually done.

The boat was anchored in Chitra and had a hole at the bottom. It wasn't even taken out of the water. The artist's half-finished drawings, including his personal items, were damaged by rats. Some eight Ansars sat idly around his residence. This is how we treat a great painter and honour the heritage he left behind. It's a crime that infuriates me.

There are plenty who shower Sultan with accolades. Seminars and symposiums are held on his birth and death anniversaries.

Among the aficionado are those who once didn't want to initially recognise him. Sad to see that people's genuine love for the arts isn't there any longer.

Sultan was a man who stood out of the crowd. A few days ago, after his death a news report was published. It said that a snake was seen resting on top of his grave and it attacked whoever tried to approach the grave. A photo of the snake was published as well. It proves that the passion Sultan had cherished for nature was reciprocated by nature in turn.

3. Sultan bhai's awe-inspiring creation was his own lifeforce. He was brought up in a Hindu family, all-inclusive in his ideology. I believe the neglect shown to him stems from prejudice because he came from such a humble background. Though a senior craftsman, his talent was undermined due to his origins. It's a shame that none of his paintings are seen hanging at the national museum and the ones who run it appear unapologetic. We should be ashamed as a nation.

Interestingly, a prominent art critic wrote a book on Sultan although he is the same one who once didn't recognise him as an artist. What's new about that? Such is the norm of our critics. It is only once that you become famous that the greatness in you gets revealed. Until you reach that level of fame, no one cares. Nowadays every one seems to write a book on him. That's good but what's the value of it, if it cannot properly explain the benchmarks for evaluating an artist, analyse and prove why he should be treasured? These books have little value.

In 1976 General Zia-ur-Rahman was at the helm of power. I was under police observation due to my political affiliation with JASHOD. One day while coming out of the International Hostel, I felt like some one was following me. I proceeded to Kamapur. It was evening and probably the month of August. The circular gallery of the Shilpakala Academy was being built at the time. I spotted a tall man in a cloak. He had long hair and was smoking joints intensely. Suddenly he stopped smoking, tucked his hand inside a pocket and took out a living cat from it. He then kissed it and handed it over to a short man standing behind him. Until that point in time, I neither knew nor had even heard of Sultan. However, later I came to know of the short man. He was called Batu and an ardent follower of Sultan.

Batu's mother was also Sultan's follower. Batu was a barber by profession. He would stand still when Sultan used to draw, with the cat in one hand and joints on the other. Sultan used to generate tremendous speed while drawing, as if he was visualising the farmer, river, banana tree and thus a whole locality would be sketched. I have never seen anyone drawing like that, but heard that Michelangelo used to paint in the same manner. I was glued to him when he worked, and visited him many nights just to see him at work.

Then came the day of Sultan's painting exhibition. Mr Abul Fazal, the then-adviser to President Zia was selected for inaugurating the show. He came from the same locality as I, so I went to him and said that I wanted to accompany him on the exhibition day. He asked why and I said that I wanted to witness the reaction to his paintings. I wanted to see how they are received.

The crowd on that day was a massive one. Attired in a long cloak, Sultan bhai delivered an idiosyncratic speech, mixing English and Bengali. The media covered the exhibition extensively. But I was amazed to see that none of the news reports focused on the aspects of his paintings. Instead the reports covered his personal life, particularly his eccentricities. They reported, for instance, on how he never stayed anywhere permanently, how he was fond of pets like snakes, cats, lizards, etc. Being curious, I personally approached a number of persons and no one could provide a convincing analytical judgment about his paintings displayed in the exhibition. Even Jainul Abedin, merely said, "Sultan paints well indeed..." but that was all. I then went to a number of art critics and all of them could come up with only a dull reply.

Another aged prominent critic of today, whose name I don't want to mention, insultingly stated that Sultan hasn't yet learnt to hold the brush. The same was opined by another renowned poet. This infuriated me. Whereas I held up Sultan to be a painter of global repute, they said that he couldn't hold the brush. But, who would listen to me?

I suspected it may be the class discrimination again. If they are forced to recognize a farmer's son like Sultan to be an esteemed painter, then they may face a serious identity crisis. I took this to be an organized conspiracy. To think in this manner, seemed like a divine

responsibility to me. In order to gain deeper knowledge I took to painting. I learnt to draw and paint. It was very hard indeed. Concurrently, I wrote a booklet of some 50 pages. Syed Atikullah paid for the publication of 5000 copies on an urgent basis and began to dispatch them to people of significance.

4. I am not afraid to admit that my personal choice of paintings is different than the ones drawn by Sultan. I am an admirer of abstract work whereas Sultan bhai's subject is a particular community. Looking at them is similar to looking at Bangladesh. His works portray the contemporary farmers as well as the traditional ones. The same farmers who lay down the foundation of civilization. Much has already been discussed about his style and so I don't want to dwell too long on this.

But I want to say that before the Renaissance period, the European artists concentrated on portraying Jesus and Mary as super-humans. And in the Renaissance period these biblical figures appeared more as humans - Mary is portrayed as a farmer's daughter and Jesus is portrayed as a tortured being. Akin to that, it's the humiliated and deprived farmers of this country that has become Sultan's chosen topic. He chose to show how farmers create their own form of art in soil.

Aside from those mentioned above, I had another memorable opportunity to witness Sultan's technique while I was residing at Dhaka University's International Hostel – where, on a wall, he had drawn bare female bosoms. It was beyond my imagination how beautiful they can be. It's only possible to visualize such eroticism through fantasy. At later stages, such topics were depicted differently, more like food and consumables. But at the beginning, they represented an erotic yet latent sexual appeal. The difference in portrayal also speaks of Sultan's transformation as an artist.

Dear readers, by now you must have noticed how disorganized I have been while writing this piece and that's why my heart does not long to write another piece on Sultan. Maybe someday I will write a novel on him. I want to end by saying my Sultan bhai was an exceptional being, his paintings are incomparable and his life inspiring. Indeed, his life itself was an excellent work of art.

The translator is deputy editor of SLR

If Sent to Exile...

Sunil Gangopadhyaya
(Translated by Anis Pervez)

If sent to exile, I will kiss my ring
I will poison myself to death!
Bangladesh with melancholy lit,
Clouds bowing upon the river bank
And at the horizon, vision infinite –
This is my only resting place.
If sent to exile, I will kiss my ring
I will poison myself to death!
The blood still flows in paddy fields
The sweat still falls on the soil;
Still people prostrate before they bathe in rivers.
Still in the heart of our rivers
Thrive the plunderers!
In the town and on the shore
Fire roars and rain pours,
Yet after it all, a beautiful dawn unfolds.
There is cruelty in the bazaar, violence in the village.
Yet the lemon trees with fireflies aglow.
In large palaces live small men,
Bullets fly, explosions sound
The wicked lie in cunning disguise.
Yet the flowers are refreshed with dew flow.
This is my only resting place.
If sent to exile, I will kiss my ring
I will poison myself to death!

Through the mist a child goes to school
A crane sits solitary by the pond.
Have I forgotten everything?
Memory, can you deceive me so?
Have I not seen on one gentle afternoon
Cotton flowers floating adrift?
The toil of beast and man abreast?
The floral sweetness of a girl's smile?
Have I not savoured the aroma of date-palm juice?
Have I not, on one such afternoon
Heard the hawk's cry
So sharp?
Bangladesh with melancholy lit...
This is my only resting place.
If sent to exile, I will kiss my ring
I will poison myself to death!