

Tragedy on the high seas

BITTER TRUTH



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

REPORTS by the IOM (International Organization for Migration), indicate that as many as 2,800 migrants from Bangladesh and Myanmar have been rescued from the sea and a staggering number of 8,000 are still believed to be stranded at sea. Contrary to UN conventions that say that a country has an obligation to render humanitarian assistance to those in distress at sea, these countries, namely, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia, have sorely resisted boats carrying desperate migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh and push them back to sea until recently when Malaysia and Indonesia have shown some relenting of this stance. Already, two vessels carrying 600 migrants had been turned away in the past week and reports gleaned from BBC say that all these men, women and children adrift at sea, in crammed cargo vessels for several weeks, without food and water are facing imminent death. This is a terrible humanitarian disaster and distinctly different from all other tragedies that occurred in the high seas, beginning from the illegal trafficking of workers to Spain, Italy and Malaysia in 2005.

The Bangladesh government cannot wash its hands off the responsibility of bringing back these hapless victims of illegal trafficking. The government must resolve the crisis through fruitful discus-

sions with the governments of Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia so that they provide temporary shelter to these hapless victims floating on the sea, and assure them that if they are Bangladeshis, they will be repatriated back to Bangladesh. Nobody can deny that the situation has resulted from the administration's neglect, inept handling and total apathy toward illegal human trafficking that had been going on unabated for years in Cox's Bazaar and Teknaf. But the administration has always turned a blind eye to these nefarious activities. Reports have it that despite the MoU reached

and thousands of young and unemployed men - mostly from impoverished families, river erosion victims and climate refugees - have taken the routes for Malaysia with dreams of finding better jobs and better means for survival. The saddest part of this trafficking game is that most end up in hell holes, maimed by torture after they are handed over to their Thai or Malaysian bosses for their inability to pay the second round of ransom money. Reports have it that many of them, having escaped from the traffickers, walked through the jungles for months, living on leaves and fruits until

ing bases in Thailand, Abu Dhabi, Spain and Saudi Arabia.

The going rate for Malaysia, as I learnt from Bangladeshi workers during my two visits to my son-in-law's work place in KL in the recent past, is now about Tk 3 to 3.5 lakh per candidate. Interestingly, these Bangladeshi men made no mention about any hardship they were facing there.

The question that necessarily arises is that why are these young men and women, bubbling with hope and ambition, trying to flee the country and jumping on to the high seas that eventually swallow them alive. It is undeniably true that the unstable political situation in the country, closure of once vibrant industries like jute, textile, steel, aluminum and glass and consequent lack of employment opportunities have propelled these youths to flee the country in search of jobs and better living elsewhere.

The government must provide them with jobs, or business or loans to conduct business. And if they want to go to these countries, they must go there with adequate training and skills. We have to build skill-development centres in all Upazilas of Bangladesh so that young men and women can work in these countries legally instead of being tricked by fraudsters and conmen.

Despite all the potential of cheap labour and a vast cohort of labour force, Bangladesh remains perpetually poor. The country is suffering from the poverty of ideas and not of resources. The country is poor entirely due to bad governance.

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between the two governments for sending five lakh Bangladeshi workers to Malaysia, the government of Bangladesh could only send seven thousand workers through this arrangement in the last four years.

The government must realise that it cannot root out this vile trafficking business by killing some 'criminals' in crossfire encounters. Rather it has to catch them alive and know from them about the spread of this vast network and also the big fishes patronising this "slave trade" for years.

During the last few years, hundreds

they were caught by police after entering Malaysia.

It is also the get-rich-quick dream which fuels the vast network of travel agents and brokers, almost all of them fake but notoriously emboldened to run this trafficking business because they enjoy the patronage of a group of law enforcers and political cadres. The smuggling of illegal migrants is a thriving industry. On an average, a few thousand youths are sent illegally to Malaysia and different Middle Eastern countries every year. Most of the brokers and agents are fly-by-night operators hav-

Kazi Ghiyasuddin's solo exhibition at Bengal Gallery

Tranquility in roaring waves of colours

MONZURUL HUQ

I'VE been following the gradual evolution of Kazi Ghiyasuddin's artistic excellence for almost two decades. His world of abstract painting has a definite setting and also a distinct mood that sets him aside from others we come across in our familiar surroundings. He is a masterful player of colours who also enjoys experimenting with forms and shapes centring on the vivid reflections that colours depict with the adjustment of sharpness and tone. So, his world of abstract is abstract in totality where the audience is given the freedom of interpretation. Titles of his paintings too give the same impression, as they are repetitive in nature and vague in narrative clarity. However, such a semi-hidden nature of his paintings also frees them from the burden of clichés that we often encounter while reading about the works of certain painter or others. His works are distinct in the sense that they do not fall into an exact frame and this makes the work of a reviewer much more complex and difficult.

To the eyes of an audience not familiar with the mood that colours might portray, his works may seem repetitive and monotonous. But this repetitive and monotonous nature also necessitates a close and distinct look at each of the works that he produces after labouring for not only days, but in some cases, months. And an eye gradually getting used to grasping that beauty after careful scrutiny can realise the hidden beauty that Kazi Ghiyasuddin intends to share with others through his paintings. Here lies the exclusivity and uniqueness of the whole range of works that the artist is now showing a Bangladeshi audience at the Bengal Gallery of Fine Arts.

This year marks the fortieth year of his stay in Japan, the country where he not only received the highest level of university education in modern painting, but also is the place that helped him find his own space in the complex and difficult world of art. It is in Japan that his works were mostly displayed and well until the early 1990s, he hardly had an exhibition in his homeland. Japan has helped him realise the rationale of being restrained in the use of colour and also taught him the importance of looking around in natural surroundings to find a subject that would reflect his inner thoughts more convincingly in painting. As a result, looking at the paintings of Kazi Ghiyas one easily gets a feeling that we might term as 'depth in simplicity', a quintessential element of Japanese paintings. But that too is part of the whole picture. The topics he presents in his own abstract forms are very much the topics that we are closely familiar with. A monsoon sky with thick clouds waiting for the ignition to unleash a downpour or a rain soaked distant field with slanting rays of sun peeping through the cloudy sky, are some of his favourite



Kazi Ghiyasuddin

topics that appear again and again in different shapes and forms in his canvases. And we know these are scenes that we, not the Japanese, are more familiar with.

The long stay in Japan has influenced Kazi Ghiyas in various ways. But deep in his heart, he remains devoted to the surroundings of his childhood and adolescence in the same way as many of our master painters of the recent past had been. In his early days in Japan, Kazi Ghiyas was deeply involved in experimenting with colour variations and the result was deep splashes of gray, brown and blue turning his canvas into a dreamy world of soul searching. And with lines from Tagore and Jibananda Das written in a subtle style, the paintings also turned a bit mystic. If that was what we might term as the early phase of his artistic creativity gradually unfolding, the present exhibition might easily be said to be the display of eventual maturity. He had been getting ready for this exhibition for quite some time now and in private conversations often mentioned it to be his final show of narrative supremacy in colour and canvas that he could attain after travelling a long way in the floating world of creativity with a mind firmly set on searching for beauty in his known surroundings. The work of art needs a creative mind and also firm resolve to produce something distinct and unique. The current exhibition added resolve to that and the end result is wave after wave of soothing images capable of captivating the audience in the beauty of his abstract world.

Like most of the artists reaching the pinnacle at a later stage of their lives, Kazi Ghiyas too had gone through stages of never ending soul searching. As mentioned above his initial works, during the early phase of his life in Japan, were full of uncertainties that the artist himself also silently confessed to as he inserted lines of

poems or thoughts in his paintings. As a result, 'Who am I?' or 'Where am I heading to?' are some of the questions that he did not hesitate to inscribe right in the middle of the canvas along with his masterful handling of colours.

I'm not sure exactly when he started to move away from that early form of uncertainty. But his experimental phase continued later as well, as he tried not only new methods of mixing colours, but also new ways of inserting unusual materials in his paintings. There was also a time when he became equally enthusiastic about selecting papers for drawing and painting. He even acquired order-made Japanese style washi paper from artisans in Bangladesh and used those for some of his water colour paintings. And in oil painting, surgical gouge pasted over the canvas and brushed in colours added extra texture to some of his paintings. Those were probably the phases in his artistic career when Kazi Ghiyas was still trying to find his own definitive form in



painting that would eventually become his signature. It seems the long soul searching has eventually landed him to a desired destination, as the current show proves beyond any doubt not only of a convincing signature, but also the maturity that someone gains only after long years of repeated trials.

The writer is a Tokyo based Bangladeshi journalist. He also teaches at Japanese universities.

INTERNATIONAL FISTULA DAY 2015

Maternity and poverty Female genital fistula in Bangladesh

NAZMUL HUDA, DESDEMONA KHAN and ABU JAMIL FAISEL

MANY mothers lose their lives while giving birth, others live with lifelong scars. One such scar is obstetric fistula, a disorder of female genitalia, mainly associated with the birth process. As studies reveal, it's a 'disease of the poor'. As medical technology advances, maternal mortality also reduces. But as poverty and social inequality still reign, many continue to suffer.

Female genital fistula is a severe morbid condition of the genitalia. Fistula affected women experience uncontrolled, non-stop passage of urine or/and feces from the vagina. This happens when the birth canal gets connected with urinary system (urethra and bladder mainly) or/and rectum through abnormal hole(s). Historically, obstructed labour has been the main cause contributing to those holes finding ways for urine or faeces leaking through the vagina.

Apart from obstructed labour, genital fistula is caused, among other things, by surgical trauma, clinical burns (radio therapy in cervix or other pelvic organs), forced intercourse, genital mutilations or even traffic accidents. In Bangladesh, three-fourth of all fistula cases at present are due to obstructed labour. Genital fistula, a major form of obstetric morbidity, is commonly associated with neglected, under-attended delivery. Only one-third of all deliveries here are attended by trained hands in hospitals or homes.

Partograph, a simple tool used by midwives and nurses to plot the progress of normal deliveries in a graph is very helpful for prompt diagnosis of obstructed labour. It helps prevent fistula. Unfortunately, most hospitals here hardly use partograph.

Fistula prevails in about 50 African and Asian countries. Presently, some one to two million women live with genital fistula globally. Annually 50,000- 100,000 new cases are added. A situation analysis report indicated that there were 71,000 fistula cases in Bangladesh in 2003. 2000 new cases are being added annually.

Poverty is an important determinant of obstetric fistula. Our findings reveal that many women with arrested fetal heads at birth canal for days did not receive any obstetric care. In Bangladesh, less than one third of the new mothers receive adequate ante-natal care.

Early marriage is a predisposing factor of fistula. The average age of marriage of fistula patients is 15 years. Discouraging early marriage is likely to reduce fistula occurrence in women. Quality pregnancy care is of high import in early prevention. In case of obstructed labour, timely referral to a facility where caesarian section is available will help. Improved nutritional status of women is also a must to prevent fistula. It helps deal with the stress of pregnancy and labour.

We observed fistula cases in almost all districts of the country. Some districts are apparently at greater risk. In haor areas of Netrokona and Kishoregonj, women suffering from obstructed labour failed to get adequate help in time. This is probably due to widespread poverty, early marriage, early pregnancy, malnutrition and low utilisation rate of ante-natal care.

Genital fistula, when caught in the early stages, could be treated by catheterisation. This treatment could be made available at district level facilities. It is good to know that the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare is currently working on a plan to set up a 'fistula corner' in all district hospitals to make early catheterisation services accessible.

In most fistula cases, the only option open is surgical repair. Fistula surgery demands high skill levels of doctors but is a relatively low-tech surgery. Fistula surgery is available at the National Fistula Centre, Dhaka Medical College, BSMM University, and in a number of private hospitals in and out of Dhaka. In all concerned hospitals fistula repair operations are done absolutely free.

Most of the time, obstetric fistula occurs at the first delivery of very young mothers. The average age of first delivery fistula cases is just eighteen. Women suffer from leaking decade after decade. The average age of the repair surgery is approximately thirty five.

Fistula is a disease of the poor. Poverty, status of women in society, access to family planning, quality maternity care and other factors feature in the spread of this disease. It needs a concerted and collective effort. A fistula-free Bangladesh is the call of the day

The writers are project manager at Engender Health Bangladesh, anthropologist at Centre for Asian Arts and Cultures, Dhaka; and the Country Representative of Engender Health Bangladesh, respectively.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
 1 Lewis' partner
 6 Verdi creation
 11 Hammerin' Hank
 12 Cow's first stomach
 13 Taking it easy
 15 Golfer Ernie
 16 Shark's home
 17 Under the weather
 18 Pourer's phrase
 20 Tell tales
 21 Spectrum end
 22 Easter lead-in
 23 Flanks
 26 Walks in water
 27 Troubling sign
 28 — Lanka
 29 Stag party guest
 30 Rider's footrest
 34 Sense of self
 35 News-stand buy, for short
 36 Lennon's wife
 37 Retailing
 40 Ryan of "Paper Moon"
 41 Soup server
 42 Doorstop shape
 43 Moves cautiously
- DOWN**
 1 Wine buys
 2 Muhammad Ali's daughter
 3 Pretentious
 4 Go bad
 5 Deli offerings
 6 Heart or liver
 7 Place for a pint
 8 Wrote to, in a way
 9 Use an easy chair
 10 Short socks
 14 Demand
 19 Small songbird
 22 Den
 23 In one way or another
 24 Dream up
 25 Signified
 26 Move Worm-style
 28 Jazz's Getz
 30 Beam
 31 Map lines
 32 Aunt's spouse
 33 Jobs
 38 Luggage ID
 39 Lamb lament

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60

Yesterday's answer

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