

The first Shahid Minar

ASHEFAQUE SWAPAN

LATE night on February 23, 1952, a young student of Dhaka Medical College was awakened from his sleep in the middle of the night. Badrul Alam, the 24-year-old student, was sleeping after a tiring day of painting posters against the recent police firing of students on February 21 that had electrified what was then East Pakistan.

Students had flouted a government ban on assembly to demand the right of Bangla to be a state language, and police had opened fire. The death of unarmed students had stunned and shocked the state.

Palashi Barracks, the army-style barracks that served as a hostel for medical students, was in the thick of the action. After a day of protests and angry demonstrations, medical student leaders decided that they were going to commemorate the language martyrs. After elected medical student leaders made the decision, word went out to wake up Badrul Alam, who was well known for his artistic flair.

He woke up, and was told to design a memorial for the commemoration. His first draft was considered too complicated, and so he was asked to simplify it.

After the design was accepted, a remarkable thing happened. In a spontaneous outpouring of solidarity, medical students, hostel staff and other volunteers worked all night, with construction material freely donated by local contractors, to build a Shahid Smriti Stambha – a memorial to the language martyrs, which was opened to the public the following morning on February 24.

Dr. Badrul Alam, my father, was a 24-year-old youth at that time. He was posthumously awarded the Ekushey Padak in 2014 for his contribution to the Language Movement.

The first Shahid Minar tends to get obscured by the more renowned and iconic Shahid Minar that is commonly associated with the Language Movement. The second memorial was built a few years later.

I think that along with the iconic Shahid Minar, the first Shahid Minar



Dr. Badrul Alam, designer of the first Shahid Minar, circa 1954. He was posthumously awarded the Ekushey Padak in 2014 for his contribution to the Language Movement.

also deserves particular appreciation and respect. The story of the first Shahid Minar reminds me of the Arab Spring movements. The building of the first Shahid Minar was a spur-of-the-moment people's response. It was a proud moment for our nation, when the fight for Bangla transcended political activism and became a popular, mass movement.

Yet until very recently, there was no decent photograph of the first Shahid Minar. How can we remember this special moment without a proper image of the structure?

Well, now we do have an excellent image, and for this the nation owes an enormous debt to Dr. Abdul Hafiz, an amateur photographer who took a photograph of the first Shahid Minar on February 24, 1952, and restored the photograph to pristine quality.

I had a chance to chat with Dr. Hafiz during his recent trip to Bangladesh. Dr. Hafiz is a retired radiologist who lives in Florida. As he reminisced to me about those fiery, emotional days of the Language Movement, it reinstated my conviction that the first Shahid Minar deserved special remembrance as a key historical moment in crystallising our passionate commitment to Bangla.

The powers-that-be certainly thought so in those days. After the first Shahid Minar was opened to the public, the overwhelming outpouring of public grief unnerved the erstwhile East

Pakistan government. People from all walks of life came to pay their respects, women left their gold jewellery as donation.

Within a few days, government forces came and demolished the structure. Dr. Hafiz told me that the fact that virtually no photographs of the first Shahid Minar have survived is no accident, but the result of conscious design.

"The police and intelligence were everywhere, looking for photographs and negatives," Dr. Hafiz told me. "My relatives got really worried that I might get into trouble. So I destroyed the negatives and all copies."

Fast forward to a couple of decades. Dr. Hafiz is now a radiologist practicing in Ohio. Suddenly, as he flips through an old textbook, out comes a photograph of the first Shahid Minar.

"I have absolutely no recollection of how it got there," said Dr. Hafiz. "I simply had no idea that the photograph even existed."

"It was a little damaged," Dr. Hafiz recalled. He retouched it, created a new negative and then made a digital copy of it. A copy of the photograph was subsequently displayed in his niece's home in Dhanmandi.

Meanwhile, Dr. Afzalunnessa, widow of Dr. Badrul Alam (and my mother), had been frantically searching for a proper photograph of the first Shahid Minar for years. A common acquaintance had seen Dr. Hafiz's

photograph in Dhanmandi and mentioned it to her. Last year, she contacted Dr. Hafiz in Florida.

Dr. Hafiz was gracious and kind. Speaking over the phone, he said he could email it to her in a moment. Dr. Afzalunnessa doesn't use email, but her daughter Kalpana Anam did, and within days the photograph reached her.

"I just couldn't keep my tears from flowing," Dr. Afzalunnessa said. "Sixty years after it all happened, for the first time I have in my hands a photograph of Dr. Alam's work. I thank Allah for this."

For Dr. Hafiz, the Language Movement was a defining experience in his life. "After I saw the deaths,

something happened to me," he said, choking up. "You know, I used to speak Urdu fluently. But after what was done to our boys, I couldn't anymore. I just couldn't."

Not only did Dr. Hafiz take the photograph, he worked until very late in the night to assist in the great labour of love of all the volunteers – the creation of the first Shahid Minar.

Dr. Hafiz has generously made this photograph available to the public domain on two conditions: He should be given photo credit, and no commercial use should be made of it.

The writer is reporter and editor of India-West weekly newspaper, based in California, U.S.A.



The first Shahid Minar. This photograph was taken on Feb. 24, 1952. It appears to be the only surviving high-quality photograph of the first Shahid Minar.

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Missing out on the zeitgeist experience



SHIFTING IMAGES
MILIA ALI

BRAVING the horrendous city traffic, I arrived at the 2016 Dhaka Art Summit (DAS) at Shilpakala Academy on a Sunday afternoon. My curiosity was

greatly aroused by the write-ups and reports, which promised that the summit (organised by The Samdani Art Foundation) offered a "one of a kind experience", cutting across the borders of cultures, styles, forms and traditions. According to curator Diana Campbell Betancourt, DAS' major goals were to create "a research platform and a hub for thought leaders, artists, curators, art and academic institutions" and to be "an arts festival for the local community with a strong educational aspect."

I should clarify at the onset that I am not an art critic. However, being an art enthusiast, I was interested to gauge how well the zeitgeist would work in fostering art and creativity in a country steeped in tradition. As I navigated the tricky terrain of galleries and displays, I was "lost" in the quagmire of a canvas forest (Burmese artists Tun Win Aung and Wah Nu), a blaring display of "light blindness" and the monochromatic serenity of Waqas Khan's lined panels. I use the word "lost" to describe my initial impressions of the exhibition, since it seemed to lack structure and flow. The experience was made more daunting because of the lack of access to catalogues or audio or video guides. Even the more traditional "Rewind" section, where unique pieces of Sultan and Rashid Choudhury caught my eye, seemed to be groping for its identity! Disappointingly, the "volunteers" were generally clueless about the

content of the exhibition. When I asked one of them about Atish Saha's performing art piece "Memories of my Mother's womb", I was simply directed to read the description at the entrance. After straining my ageing eyes for five minutes (since the writing was in such small print that one would need a magnifying glass to decipher anything), I gathered that the artist had locked himself in a cage for 53 hours to experience the confinement in a mother's womb. A

novel idea, no doubt, but, in the absence of proper context and interactive dialogue, it seemed that free artistic expression in this case had crossed over to the realm of the bizarre!

My criticism perhaps pertains more to the facilitation rather than the content. There was an overall lack of continuity that may have hampered the viewers' understanding and critical appreciation of the projects. This

could have been countered by some guided tours. The summit organisers wanted the event to be "not a biennial, not a symposium, not a festival — but rather somewhere in-between". Sadly, throughout my visit I was in the realm of in-between, struggling to understand what should be my take-away from the summit.

As I mentioned, I am not an art virtuoso. But I am keenly interested in art and have made special efforts to visit most major galleries across the globe. In my opinion, art should serve two main purposes: it should have an educational value and also provide spiritual and intellectual stimulation. Regrettably, the DAS fell short on both these counts. I came out feeling somewhat unfulfilled. In fact, I wondered how the consolidated efforts of 300 artists, curators and other art professionals could have produced such minimal impact!

Perhaps the background talks by art critics, the performances and film programmes were meant to shed more light on the contemporary art and its diverse forms. I must confess that I did not attend any of the sessions, but I doubt if most of the general audience did either. I realise that the current trend is to take a multi-disciplinary approach to art. The idea is to not only permit freedom of expression, but also proactively engage the audience. Curators are, therefore, increasingly

challenged to find the fine balance between educating viewers about artistic traditions and letting art speak for itself.

In this context The Samdani Art Foundation's attempt to introduce Dhaka viewers to a range of multi-faceted art forms is commendable. However, was the audience mentally prepared for this "evolved experience"? I can't tell -- but I wasn't. As I noted earlier, a greater effort in guiding the viewers would have gone a long way in making this world-class exhibition a local success. Perhaps the curators were concerned that organised tours would significantly interfere with the aesthetics of a personal art experience. And it is a valid concern. On the other hand, the more experimental a programme is in design or content, the greater is the barrier to public acceptance and appreciation.

I sincerely hope that the next Dhaka Art Summit will cater to visitors like me, who have a relatively limited amount of time to invest. My wish list for next year's DAS includes: more user-friendly labels, scheduled guided tours like those at the Met and other museums, more savvy volunteers. After all, there is no denying that a "cutting edge" art exhibition requires extra attention and effort to ensure that it is an uplifting and inspiring experience for the viewers.

The writer is a Tagore exponent.



PHOTO: STAR

QUOTABLE Quote

HARPER LEE
To Kill A Mockingbird
The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Bar mixer
5 Extreme diet
9 Hip-hop headgear
10 Extreme
12 Full of verve
13 Blood part
14 University officers
16 " -- Believer"
17 Yale rooter
18 Rejuvenation sites
20 Language rules
22 Coop group
23 Digression
25 Small fastener
28 Glides
32 Carryall
34 Bunion spot
35 Brouhaha
36 Filthy
38 High-IQ group
40 Adored
41 Indiana player
42 Without exception
43 Go ahead
44 Bears' lairs

DOWN
1 Without help
2 Source
3 Humorist Barry
4 Programs
5 Persnickety
6 Pub pints
7 Rank indicator
8 President from Independence
9 Is bold
11 Run up
15 Fare carrier
19 Citi Field's forerunner
21 VCR insert
24 Imitated vehicle
25 Sender's need
26 "Forget it!"
27 Right away
29 Director soderberg
30 Copier powders
31 Squalid
33 Get on
37 Inlet
39 Shark's place

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

D	A	T	A	T	T	S
P	O	K	E	T	A	I
O	D	E	P	R	O	T
T	E	S	T	E	R	S
S	A	R	I	S	C	E
B	A	N	R	A	M	
H	U	E	Y	B	E	R
A	T	A	K	I	P	P
R	O	T	U	N	D	A
S	P	I	R	E	S	L
H	I	N	G	E	T	O
A	G	E	D	O	G	R

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

MY MOTHER SENT YOU A BIG COOKIE, SARGE

WOW! HOW NICE OF HER!

IT WAS ALSO SMART OF HER TO SEND A DECOY

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

THIS IS AMAZING! IT'S LIKE POETRY.

BRIGHT LEAVES FALLING, CREATING A CARPET BENEATH OUR FEET.

THAT'S REALLY BEAUTIFUL, DAD.

I LIKE TO THINK OF IT AS STOMPING ON TREE POOP.