



# On the trail of an artist

As a tribute to Bangladeshi athletes participating at the Rio Olympics 2016, Star Lifestyle commissioned Nobo Kumar Bhadra, a veteran rickshaw and cinema banner artist, to make commemorative works of rickshaw art. What was once a booming trade is now almost extinct; this unique form of art is dying out. Being in this field for more than 30 years, Nobo has enjoyed the glory days and then saw how this world around him began to collapse. Read on, as we take a sneak peek into this fascinating field of art whilst following an artist on his journey.

The early '80s was not a good time for young Nobo Kumar. "Because of the financial difficulties my family was going through at that time, I had to drop out from school," Nobo recalls. "My father sent me to work for a cinema banner and rickshaw artist."

And that was how a young boy began his career in the art world.

Rickshaw art has myriad themes and subjects. From folklores, to cinemas, to pastoral landscape, it reflects Bengali culture and ethos.

Affixed on the rear of a rickshaw is a metal plate. And this metal plate is the traditional 'canvas' where the artist paints. Rickshaw art is like no other - loud and vibrant, painted using enamel paint.

The beefed up heroes and the eroticised heroines are sensational. The anthropomorphic animals tease our imaginations and give a glimpse into the world of folklores and fantasies.

However, Nobo Kumar's initial days as an apprentice were not very productive. "I was not focused enough. I mainly used to run errands; bring paints or tea for the ustad," Nobo admits.

The master artist eventually brought this to the boy's attention and demanded him to be serious about his job. "Why do you waste so much time? Remember that you have come here to learn," Nobo recalls his master's words.

After the nudge to the right direction, he became more serious. The apprentice used to sketch, paint the costumes of heroes and heroines, and so on. He made himself useful as a junior artist. Not just movie banners, he also aided his master in rickshaw art.

Little by little, he was getting hold of things, developing a knack for the art.

Five years later, besides working for the ustad, he started making and selling his



own rickshaw art. "I got very little money, and thought that it will not be a bad idea if I can earn some additional cash," Nobo said. "I made my own works and sold them at Bongshal."

In 1990, Nobo Kumar Bhadra became a fully independent artist. He learned the ropes well and now could take on the world on his own. Orders were pouring in.

The first group exhibition he participated at took place in 1999 at Alliance Francaise. The event, which featured works of around 83 rickshaw artists, was a turning point of his life. "My artworks caught the attention of the then director of Alliance Francaise and she ordered several. She even offered me an administrative job at the organisation."

For Nobo Kumar, it was a fantastic opportunity, both for his art and finances.

However, at the turn of the 21st century, he felt that rickshaw art and cinema banners had become a thing of the past. "Most rickshaws now use digital prints as it is



much cheaper. Today, not many rickshaw owners will opt for an artwork," he informed.

Numerous artists had left this profession. Just like rickshaw art, movie posters and banners also went through the change of digitalisation. Meanwhile, the number of theatres has also declined. But Nobo says, "Well there are still many cinema halls in Dhaka; how many give us orders now?"

Nobo remembers how busy he used to be as an artist. "We used to work late nights to meet deadlines. A cinema hall could make one gigantic banner that would stretch two or three floors! In such cases, it was a team, of, say five people, working on a single piece."

His banners were hung in front of many renowned cinema halls, including Balaka, Ananda, Modhumita and Gulistan.

As the art saw its decline, Nobo kept going with his job. Painting became secondary; less prioritised. But then, seeing the different exhibitions that were held at

Alliance Francaise, he renewed his interest.

He was, after all, an artist. How could he let go?

His first solo exhibition was held in 2010, which was followed by a few more solo and group exhibitions in the coming years.

"In 2014, a group exhibition was held at Bangladesh National Museum with just nine of us. I remember that during the exhibition in 1999 that was a large number of rickshaw artists. One and half decade later, the number has fallen substantially; the difference is striking."

Today, rickshaw art is more or less confined to galleries, offices and living rooms. That's good; but is it good enough? Unless we bring it back to the streets, can we say that we can ever fully revive this dying genre of art?

What do you think the future holds for rickshaw art?

By M H Haider

Art: Nobo Kumar Bhadra