

For a very long time, most of us thought Bangladesh was better known for its folk art forms. At least when it came to the art of dancing, the classical ones we would recognise and associate with would all be from India-Bharatanatyam from South India, Odissi from Odissa, Manipuri from Manipur, Kathak from North India and so on. Up until a couple of years ago, this was a common misconception. But then Professor Mahua Mukherjee's student Rachel Priyanka Perris dazzled the nation as she came back with abundant theoretical and practical knowledge on what was then the classical dance of the undivided Bengal, Gaudiya Nritya. Having retreated to the recesses of many a mind over the years, Gaudiya Nritya has now successfully been revived and is on

Bharati- a Gaudiya dance troupe, with whom she travelled all over India for shows. She did *Guruvasa Nivasam* throughout her years in Kolkata, which is to live in the guidance and shelter of your Guru, in the same house. "I used to travel to and from university taking two trains, but I was still determined to live with my Guru, where I could practice dance all day and all night."

Rachel graduated in 2010 and had completed her Master's by 2012, with Bharatanatyam as her chosen discipline both times. When it came to her MPhil, her focus was on Gaudiya. "My Guru would always say that performing arts is like a bird with two wings; one wing is of practicality, the other is of theory and without both, one cannot soar."

Rachel came back in December 2014,

REVIVING GAUDIYA: RACHEL'S JOURNEY

NAZIBA BASHER

its way to stages across the world to represent Bengal.

"When I was four years old, my mother enrolled me into BAFA, where I completed their certificate course by the time I was in class four or five. I gave my certificate examination after I completed my intermediate studies, though," says Rachel. As her journey in the world of dance began at an age so young, Rachel had the opportunity to find her true passion. In 2003, she took part in a countrywide competition held by Nrityanchal, where she came first in the *Srijanshil shakha, G bibhag*. "That competition got me involved with Nrityanchal. And once I got involved, my interest moved completely from folk to classical. I was learning Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and also Odissi."

In 2004, Shamim Ara Nipa, a co-founder of Nrityanchal and esteemed dancer, went to India in search of a Chhau instructor, where she met Professor Mahua Mukherjee, the sole reviver of Gaudiya Nritya. Professor Mahua came back with the team from Bangladesh and they held the first Gaudiya Nritya workshop in Bangladesh.

"I instantly fell in love with Gaudiya. The one problem I would face the most with other dances was the language barrier. But in Gaudiya, I can understand. It is the dance of Bengal, after all."

Rachel was determined by then to pursue her higher education on dance. With the full support of her parents, she travelled to Rabindra Bharati, Kolkata, where she began her Bachelor's degree on Bharatanatyam. "Going to Kolkata turned my life around completely. I actually began classes on Gaudiya with Mahua Mukherjee before my classes on Bharatanatyam. My whole attention started shifting towards that form then." Rachel got involved with Gaudiya Nritya



although her promotion of Gaudiya Nritya began much earlier when she would come back every now and then from Kolkata to do a performance or two. "One person, Sharmila Bandyopadhyay, helped me immensely in taking Gaudiya to new heights. She gave me the opportunity to perform Gaudiya in Chhayanaut since 2011. That's when people began recognising this as the classical dance of Bengal. I also did a workshop and performance in 2013 on Gaudiya. That is when I would also write for The Daily Star on cultural events. The Daily Star and Liaquat Ali Lucky, the DG of Shilpokala Academy, helped me a lot not only in terms of nationwide recognition but also by paying due focus on Gaudiya."

Taking Gaudiya as the dance of Bengal on international platforms is now a main focus of Rachel's. "We always perform folk dances on international stages, which are mostly creative dances and not even



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

Rachel Priyanka Perris



PHOTOS: RIDWAN ADID RUPON

proper folk. So, taking our own classical dance to an international platform should now become an agenda."

In 2015, Rachel joined Dhaka University as a part time lecturer, since the inception of the Dance department, teaching Bharatanatyam, Natyashastra and Rabindranritya. The youth will now be the ones tasked with carrying on this love and passion for arts, she believes, which is why Rachel is now involving the younger dancers in her quest. "But, the love for the art must come from one's family. Without family support, it is not possible to give your time to this art, for which rigorous practice is a must. There is no classical dance without rigour."

Rachel is also a teacher at Shurer Dhara, an organisation by Rezwana Chowdhury Bonnya, for their Music for Development programme where she teaches dance to underprivileged children.

When it comes to the dispersion of classical dance amongst the masses, Rachel thinks the television plays a big role. "Who do we see during the Eid dance shows? How many dancers can you recognise? Maybe some of the backup dancers are professional dancers, but the main dancer? Always an actress or a model. Why? Because TRP matters. While they take over the stages, dancers do not get much opportunity. So the television channels need to think about who and what to promote."

According to Rachel, dance is the one art form that brings back the least to the performer. "You can practice for hours, days, weeks and months, and you do it all for maybe 6 minutes on stage and a few seconds of applause. Without pure love and devotion, it is difficult to do well in classical dance. But I see a lot of families in support for the art of dancing now, and it gives me hope", she concludes.

STAR PEOPLE

CHASING THE WINGED RATS

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN



PHOTO: INTERNET

Skyscrapers, luxury hotels in the UAE have been facing existential threat from a very charming creature which is often symbolised with peace and holiness. For years, these little creatures have been playing such havoc with the some of the strongest structures in the world that the Sheikhs have been investing millions to tackle them. These creatures are the hundreds and thousands of pigeons that live all across the Emirates. Pigeon droppings contain strong acidic substance that easily eat into tar based roofing of concrete buildings. Their droppings can also stain concrete so severely that long-time accumulation of these substances can decisively damage the entire building. However, pigeons are also a symbol of aristocracy for the Arabs who rear this bird in large numbers in their homesteads.

A very different kind of professionals has appeared in the Emirates to solve this ever intensifying crisis. They are the professional falconers whose trained falcons to chase flocks of pigeons at a speed up to 320 kilometres per hour. However, these falcons are trained not to kill any pigeon rather they only drive the pigeons away from sitting or nesting on the buildings. According to Reuters 18,000 falcons have been registered in the UAE to do this job. David Stead, owner of Al Hurr Falconry Services told Reuters in an interview, "The market of falconry in the Emirates is massive. There is also space for more. We fly at all their hotels and skyscrapers such as Burj Al Arab, Emirates Towers, Madinat Jumeirah and the demands are increasing day by day."

And these falconers have been earning millions. Per month, a falconer earns on an average 10,000 to 40,000 US\$ from a single bird. As an ecological way of pest control, wildlife conservationists across the world also have endorsed falconry to control pigeon population in the urban areas. Nowadays, as the billion dollar skyscrapers and luxury hotels have become easy prey to pigeon droppings, falconers have come with the flag of rescue and certainly the have won a fortune in the Manhattan of the middle east.

TRADITION

If you roam around China's suburbs, you will be charmed by the decorative doors and windows of the shops and houses that are livened up by beautiful paper cuts with exquisite carvings and interesting shapes. To the Chinese people, it is an aesthetic expression of joy and happiness. It has also been recognised by UNESCO as a 'world outstanding handicraft'.

During a recent trip to China's Shaanxi province, I had the opportunity to get a glimpse of this traditional art form of China. China Daily, one of the leading English newspapers of China, organised the trip and invited around twenty journalists from twelve countries to discover the splendour of Yulin, an administrative city of Shaanxi. Shaanxi is particularly famous for its diverse patterns and vivid depictions of folk motifs in paper-cut art.



Looking forward to my beloved

SHAANXI FOLK PAPER-CUT CRAFT AN ART OF HAPPINESS

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

PHOTOS: COURTESY

On the first day of the trip, we were taken to the Pedestrian Street in Yulin, which resembles the roads of Old Dhaka. There we visited the paper-cut shop owned by Cao Hongxia, a senior craft artist widely revered in China for her unique paper-cut techniques. The enthusiastic manager of the shop showed us a framed paper-cut portrait of Michelle Obama and related that when the American first lady visited Yulin, she showed particular interest in this craft and enjoyed live performances of Hongxia's paper-cut art.

We also experienced the joy of watching a live paper-cut performance. Several layers of paper are fastened together on a relatively soft foundation. Artists cut the motif in hollowed patterns into the paper with a sharp knife, holding it vertically. Every cut-out consists of a single motif rendered in symmetrical designs.

The paper-cut motifs range from pastoral life, folk ballads, ancient monuments to modern day events and people. Interestingly, there are two particular Chinese characters you will find in almost every paper-cut: fu and

xi. Fu means luck while xi means 'double happiness'. The manager informed us that during weddings, people paste these characters on doors and windows of the room of newly-weds to wish them a blissful conjugal life. It is believed that light would shine through the negative space of the cut-out and bring luck and happiness to the family.

Most of the works we found in the shop were done on red paper. You will also find the predominant existence of red colour all over China. I originally thought it might have some connection with the ideology of Communism because red is revered as the colour of revolution. Still, I asked the manager about it. He informed us that red symbolises the colour of auspiciousness in Chinese tradition, and the red revolution added extra brightness to the meaning of the colour to Chinese people.

In the shop, there were books and showpieces



designed with paper-cut art. The manager presented us a book on Chinese folk stories illustrated with paper-cuts. The simple and touching emotion of folk ballads are exquisitely rendered in ingenious carvings of papers.

When we were returning from the pedestrian street, our tour guide shared that the art of paper cutting is as old as the history of the invention of paper. As paper was first invented in China and then spread all over the world, the paper-cut art accompanied this and took different forms in different regions of the world according to their local styles. In Bangladesh, we also have a rich heritage of paper-cuts, though it does not get much attention. I do not know whether our local paper-cut crafts have any ancestral link with the Chinese ones.

I left the place with the lingering thought that when people first invented the paper, they probably expressed their joy of invention through the colours and shapes of paper-cut craft, which still touches every person from all over the world.

The writer is Sr. Editorial Assistant at The Daily Star.