

Understanding art is not only about appreciating the finer details—the aesthetics, the technique, the colour, and the characteristics of the genre—perhaps it is much simpler. And in reality, it is!

Every piece of art, great or otherwise, creates an impression on the human mind and only when an onlooker manages to engage in a tête-à-tête, the artwork unravels its countless layers of beauty. Shambhu Acharya and his scroll paintings (known as *potchitro*) achieve that effortlessly. We have long parted ways from our rustic ways and it is egocentric to presume that pastoral Bengal will not follow suit. For nine generations the Acharya family has depicted rural Bengal in a dream-like setting, where life was simpler but in no way easy.

Potchitro, in older times, were also an integral part of entertainment. A *patua* would paint a sequence of events from mythology, religious scriptures, or folktales in a series of rectangular frames in a vertical format. The performer (sometimes the artist himself) would then gradually unroll the scroll, pointing to different illustrations with a thin bamboo staff. Percussionists accompanied the rhymed metrical verses in front of an eager crowd, which

spinach), powdered bricks and almost everything he could lay his hands on to create colour and paint! And this continues to this day.

For black, he makes use of soot; for shades of red, he experiments with vermilion conventionally used as *sindoor*; egg yolks, wood apples, *sabu dana* and various kinds of clay are all important ingredients in his art.

This is a laborious process involving days for making one single colour, but Shambhu feels that it is important for his expression. As far as preparing natural dyes is concerned, Shambhu Acharya can rightfully claim a unique position in the local art scene.

Shambhu's puritan position, however, is not limited to colours only. For preparing the canvases, he uses *markin* fabric and utilises age-old techniques. The cloth is fast layered with mud or cow dung and dried. It is then layered again with a paste made from tamarind seeds and powder of brick and chalk. The final canvas, called *doli*, is not only durable but adds yet another unique feature to Bangladeshi scroll painting.

For almost 450 years, the Acharya family has been nurturing the art of making *potchitro*, which depicts various mythical and religious themes, but it is



The enduring charm of *potchitro*

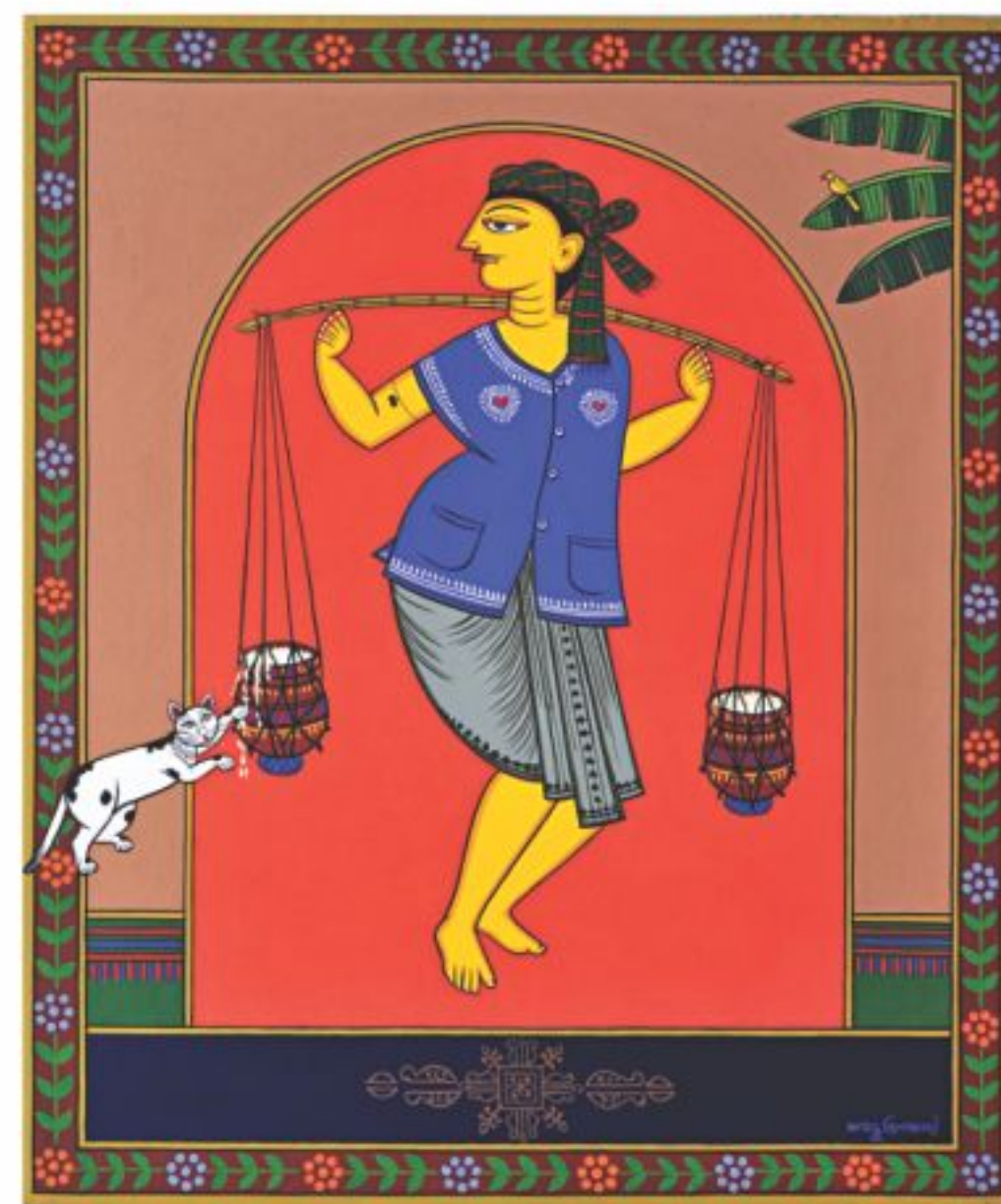
MANNAN MASHHUR ZARIF

gathered in the courtyard of rural homesteads.

With the passage of time, such acts lost their popularity and slowly the tradition faded in the annals of Bengal. And along with the performances, the paintings also vanished. It was only as recently as 1977 that renowned folklore specialist Tofail Ahmed stumbled upon a '*Gazir Pata*', hitherto considered to be the last remaining piece of *Gazir Pata*, a unique style that once flourished among the folk artists of the eastern part of Bengal. Ahmed soon embarked on a quest to rediscover this lost form of art and his search brought him to Shudhir Acharya, a quaint artist residing in Bikrampur.

Shudhir was a *potua* who maintained his livelihood by making idols of Hindu deities. Recognising the talent of Shudhir Acharya, Tofail Ahmed encouraged him to devote time to *potchitro*. This re-kindled the flame in the artist's heart and after years of neglect, brought the this form of near-extinct folk art out in open. But it would take Shambhu Acharya, the able son of Shudhir, to take it further—even across borders.

Shambhu Acharya takes pride in the fact that even before he learned the alphabets, he could draw and paint. Traditionally, *potuas* use natural ingredients to prepare the colours for scroll paintings. This was to Shambhu's advantage. As a child he made best uses of *kochu* (taro stems), *pui shaak* (Malabar



possibly in *Gazir Pata* that Shambhu excels at.

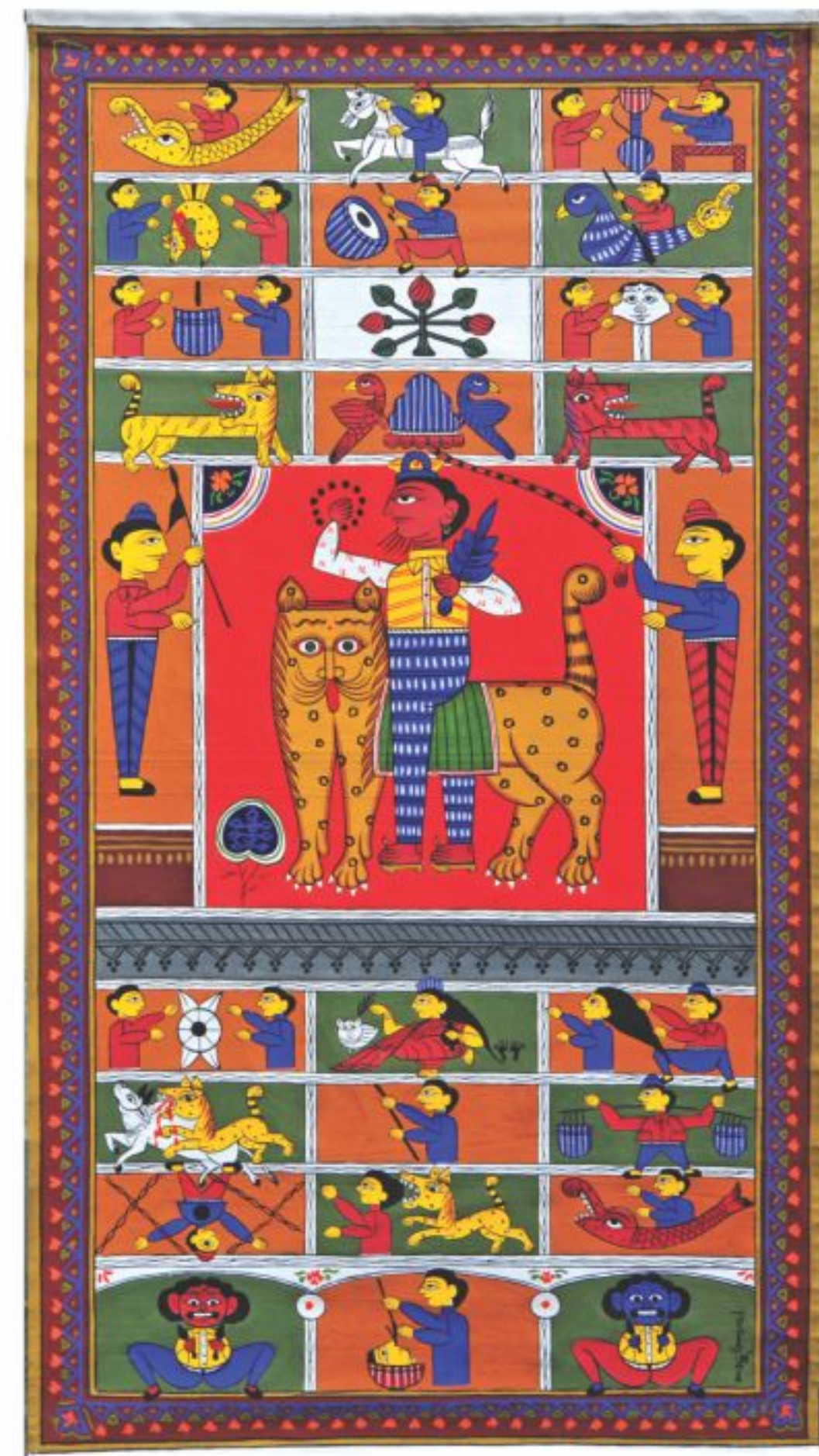
Gazir pata is a form of scroll painting that depicts the bravery and conquests of Ismail Gazi, a Muslim general who served the Sultan Barbak in the 15th century. Painted in panel form, the *potchitro* depict various miraculous events associated with Gazi Pir and his supernatural powers.

The Gazi seated on a tiger with its tail lifted; a cow being grabbed by a tiger; Daksin Ray, regarded as a king of tigers, holding a mallet in his hand—these are the spellbinding imageries that narrate the tale of the Gazi!



After successfully re-introducing *potchitro* in the mainstream, Shambhu Acharya had the privilege of exhibiting in London where he, along with his companion Durjon Ali Miah, recreated a scene from the distant past in a remote village of Bengal. As Miah narrated the saga of Gazi Pir, Shambhu highlighted the relevant images in the scrolls.

Always true to his beliefs, Shambhu, inspired by noted historian Professor Dr. Enamul Haque, attempted to depict the struggle for freedom of this nation, beginning with the Battle of Plassey to Mujib's assassination in 1975. Aptly called the '*Sahi Shaheed Mujibnama*', through 20 scrolls and a poignant narrative written and composed by Professor Haque, he recreated an honest presentation of the two aspects of this heritage — the images and the songs.



An exhibition featuring 40 of Shambhu Acharya's latest works is now being held at the EMK Centre, Dhanmondi. The event will continue till July 27, 2017.

Shambhu Acharya's works have been included in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum London, and in numerous private collections at home and abroad. ■

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The television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is perhaps more hyperrealist than dystopian. In the apocalyptic near-future, birth rates have declined due to sterility from sexually transmitted diseases and environmental pollution. Amidst this chaos, Gilead, a totalitarian, Christian theonomy, has overthrown the American government under the pretext of restoring order. And

on the novel, "One of my rules was that I would not put any events into the book that had not already happened in what James Joyce called the 'nightmare' of history, nor any technology not already available. No imaginary gizmos, no imaginary laws, no imaginary atrocities. God is in the details, they say. So is the Devil." The concept of conscripting fertile handmaids to the highest in society itself is an interpretation of a

This involved members of the SS mating with suitable German women, and kidnapping blue-eyed, blonde-haired children to populate the Third Reich.

And yet, the system does not work even with controlled reproduction. Many of the Commanders themselves are infertile and the handmaids end up being "assisted" by the good doctor to conceive. Such a system should naturally crumble under its own weight, but

West. The man at the coffee shop they stop at for drinks says their money's no good here—June's debit card is literally declined even though she just deposited a check. When she asks him to try again, the man calls them sluts and forces them to leave. Take away the colour of their skin, and the looming threat of religious fundamentalism and slut-shaming is all too recognisable in our very own society.

But if the slut-shaming does not hit a



THE HANDMAID'S TALE

A dystopia all too familiar

AMIYA HALDER

under this new world order, women have been stripped of all their rights, and segregated into social classes on the basis of their fertility.

The story is told in the first person by a woman called Offred (a slave name meaning Of Fred), one of a class of women who have been enslaved to bear children for Commanders and their wives, i.e. the ruling class. Unlike the books, where the real name of the protagonist is never directly revealed to the reader, the very first episode of the series discloses her real name—June. This revelation both humanises and empowers the protagonist. Whereas the Offred of the book was resigned, a witness more than anything, the Offred of the television series increasingly becomes a heroine.

While we as viewers often fail to look beyond the machinations of the fantasy genre to appreciate the underlying metaphors and warning signs, *The Handmaid's Tale* is at once so violent and familiar, that its implications are difficult to dismiss. As Atwood herself has said



Biblical account. Rachel and Leah were sisters married to Jacob. Rachel, who cannot give Jacob a child, convinces her husband to impregnate her handmaid Bilhah so she can have children "through" her. This ritualised rape is normalised and sanctified in Gilead by being named 'the Ceremony'.

Biblical references aside, systemised propagation of the gentility has a historical precedent dating back to the Lebensborn programme of the Nazi regime. In 1935, Germany's birth rates were dropping, and Hitler's right hand man had designed a breeding programme to promote an 'Aryan' future.

instead, other nations want to follow suit and even purchase handmaids for the propagation of their own people. In the most brutal and crushing twist of fate, Mexico's ambassador, who herself is a woman, visits to complete a trade agreement for handmaids.

And while the series is set in the white-majority West, at times, many of the elements feel too close to home for comfort. For instance, in the days leading up to the coup by the fundamentalist right, Offred, still called June at the time, goes for a run with her best friend Moira, wearing the shorts-and-spandex workout gear that is ubiquitous in the

nerve, it is when the women are dispossessed off their financial assets and evicted from their offices that may invoke the strongest reaction in a viewer and a woman. Even in our country, although women are earning more, they often do not have control over their own assets. The omnipresent, collective fears of women are so concentrated in their portrayal, that at first *The Handmaid's Tale* may seem fantastical. In fact, there is no better and accurate representation of the horror and oppression that can become normal.

Saudi-American poet Majda Gama described to the Times being unable to sleep after watching the opening episodes of the television series. "What Offred, the handmaid, lived as some cautionary tale felt very much like my lived reality. One woman's dystopia is another woman's reality," she said. *The Handmaid's Tale* makes us aware of the many freedoms we take for granted, and conversely, the many understated ways in which society attempts to control our minds and bodies. If events are unfolding too slowly around us to start questioning the powers that be and resist whatever comes our way, then let television shake us out of our complacency, with a depicted reality that is borderline, not distant, that is imaginable, not extraordinary. ■