

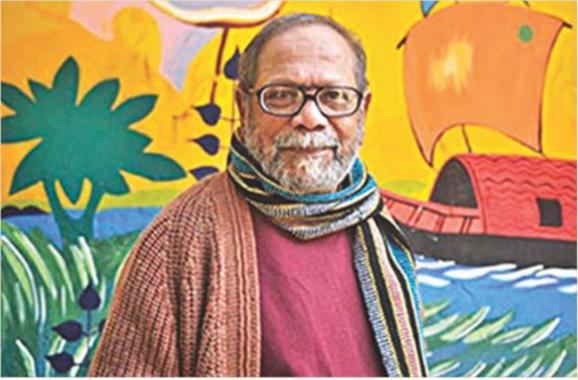
Tale of a butterfly man

A conversation with Murtaza Bashir on his 86th birthday

ZAHANGIR ALOM

A butterfly's origin is in its caterpillar beginnings. Soldiering through sunlight and rain for a certain period, suddenly it comes out of its cocoon as a colourful winged creature. And we come to love the once ugly entity in its new form. Like the painful transformation of a butterfly, the artist too undergoes a similar ordeal to produce a masterpiece.

For the eminent artist-writer Murtaza Bashir, who celebrates his 86th birthday today, creating a painting is like giving birth to a child. His six-decade career, starting from 1954, occupies a unique



Murtaza Bashir

place in the modern art history of Bangladesh. But what makes this prolific artist stand out is his continuous attempt to learn, grow and evolve.

"I don't paint all the time. But when I do, I can't stop myself until my spontaneous impulses are satisfied. When I am not at work, I contemplate. The moods of my paintings are diverse as I go through a myriad of feelings and experiences," says Murtaza Bashir.

As a socially conscious artist, Bashir's paintings are much more than what they appear to be. He often tries to capture the struggles of the people around him. His love for realism is unmistakable—portraying detailed and

unadorned forms of life—even when he decides to delve into the abstract form. He has taken both styles and created his own to respond to the modernist's trend of abstraction. He later transformed his styles into abstract realism.

"Darkness prevailed in our society during Ayub Khan's tenure. It was a period marked by socio-political turmoil, and crimes such as rape and drug abuse were frequent newspaper headlines. In reaction to these, I created the series 'Wings of Butterfly.'

"I also created another series titled 'The Wall' in 1969. It portrays the ambience of suffocation that engulfed us all. During the War of Liberation, I, along with my wife and our two daughters, fled to Paris. When I watched the plight of the freedom fighters and common people on television, I was driven by a deep sense of guilt. Then I created the 'Epitaph for the Martyrs' series as my homage to the freedom fighters. The idea of the series struck me when I came across a small stone on the streets of Paris.

"In the pre-historic times, when a warrior died, a stone would be kept beside his head. The stone symbolised the soul. Inspired by this, I started the 37-painting series in Paris and completed it in Chittagong. I also created 'Eruption' and 'Radiant' denouncing the autocratic rule of Ershad," he says.

An interesting aspect of Bashir's work is his self-portraits. He draws himself at least once, if not more, every year. "You know what I had learnt from my life? No one is your true friend. Your inner self is the only entity you can truly rely on and trust your deepest secrets with. When I feel lonely, I stand in front of the mirror and ask who I am."

The answer lies in his drawing of his own self.

"In fact, every time I finish a self-portrait, the man on the canvas seems somewhat unknown to me. I feel like there is still so much to explore and express. I love to chronicle my life, in

sickness and distress, in happiness and laughter. When I had my cataract operation, and one of my eyes were shut with bandages, I was in pain. But I drew myself nonetheless."

Born in 1932, Murtaza Bashir regards

library, which was full of valuable Bengali and English books and journals.

In 1947, when he was in class nine, he became an active member of the student wing (Chhatra Federation) of the Communist Party. Bashir believes

day. During his stay in Florence, he sought comfort and inspiration in the works of the pre-Renaissance painters, including Giotto, Cimabue, Duccio, Simone Martini and Fra Angelico.

Bashir says he doesn't know whether he will live on as an artist in the public minds, but he is confident that he will be remembered as a writer, who penned a few novels, short stories and poems. He has five poetry books—*Trosorenu*, *Tomakei Shudhu*, *Esho Phirey Anusua*, *Tatka Rokter Khino Rakha*, (he also translated it in English as *Fresh Blood Faint Line*) and *Sada Elegy*—to his credit.

The Ekushey Padak winner says, "The governmental awards are now conferred on people with known allegiance to certain political platforms. I am yet to receive the Shadhinata Padak. I have told my children not to accept any posthumous award after my death."

In 1964, Murtaza Bashir wrote the screenplay for the film version of Humayun Kabir's novel *Nodi O Nari*. He was the film's art director and also the main assistant to the director. He was also an art director for the Urdu film *Kaise Kahoon* in 1965. He had published a collection of short stories called *Kanch-er Pakhir Gaan* in 1969. He wrote two more novels—*Mitar Shangey Char Shandha* and *Amitakkhar*.

A history enthusiast, researcher and numismatist, Bashir has studied and interpreted coins of the Bengal Sultan period with the scholarly commitment of a historian. An avid autograph collector, he has always loved archiving stamps and match boxes.

Commenting on his reaching the 86-year mark, the octogenarian artist, currently suffering from diabetes and other old-age complications, says, "This year I am going to celebrate my 86th birthday," darkly adding, "My father died after three days celebrating his 86th birthday. The earth is small and our life is short, but it's what we do with it that matters in the end."



Sunflower, oil on canvas, 87X61 cm, 1967

himself as "an artist by chance." The youngest son to the eminent scholar Dr Muhammed Shahidullah and Marguba Khatun, Bashir in his childhood would often be found engrossed in the pictures and illustrated figures in his father's

that his lifelong dedication to important social causes and affinity for paintings stemmed from his adherence to the communist ideology.

Bashir was greatly inspired by Picasso, who remains his idol to this

day. During his stay in Florence, he sought comfort and inspiration in the works of the pre-Renaissance painters, including Giotto, Cimabue, Duccio, Simone Martini and Fra Angelico.

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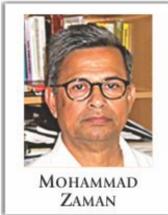
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Zahangir Alom is a member of the Arts & Entertainment department at *The Daily Star*.

"Shanghaiing" Dhaka

Is there potential for eastbound expansion of Dhaka through establishing a Pudong-like city?



MOHAMMAD ZAMAN

I am intrigued by the recent remarks made by Zhu Ruo, a leading urban planning expert in China, suggesting that

Dhaka follow Shanghai's example in regards to urban transformation and growth. Mr Zhu was in Dhaka in mid-July for the first time, at the invitation of the World Bank, to attend an international conference on development options for Dhaka towards 2035. As the dean of the Pudong Planning and Design Institute, he witnessed firsthand Shanghai's eastbound growth in Pudong—watching the area transform from a marshy rice field in the 1980s to a powerful modern global financial centre packed with skyscrapers. Mr Zhu reportedly found many similarities between present day Dhaka and the Shanghai of the early 1990s, hence his assertion that Dhaka could learn from the Shanghai experience to transform itself into a modern city through proper planning and development.

I believe Mr Zhu was right in many respects. There are surely numerous lessons to be learned from the Shanghai experience. However, "Shanghaiing" Dhaka would not be an easy task. Nevertheless, Mr Zhu's

idea is undoubtedly inspiring and deserves careful consideration. In this brief review, I discuss the various options for expansion of Dhaka, including need for careful policy consideration prior to making plans following the Shanghai example.

Shanghai epitomises what a world-class city means in terms of its economy, transportation, social infrastructure, environmental management and governance. Today, Shanghai is the principal commercial and financial centre of Mainland China. In 2017, it was ranked thirteenth in the Global Financial Centres Index and fourth most competitive in Asia after Singapore, Hong Kong and Tokyo. Shanghai is also home to 300 of the Fortune 500 companies. Manifestly, it is an economic powerhouse in Asia. Shanghai is the largest city in China with 25 million people and one of the fastest growing cities in the world. The city is served by excellent public transit systems, including high-speed bullet trains. The Pudong International Airport is a state of the art facility and one of the largest in the Asia-Pacific region. Shanghai is visited by close to 10 million tourists every year. To summarise, in less than three decades, Pudong helped transform Shanghai into a modern global city. Today, Pudong is viewed as the embodiment of Shanghai's modernisation and a symbol of China's reform and development.

Needless to say, cities are our

future. Nearly 50 percent of the global population will live in cities by 2035. Dhaka, the capital, is the country's only megacity. It is also the main business and commercial hub of the country. Currently, Dhaka has an estimated population of over 15 million in the metropolitan areas. With recent administrative expansion of the city area, Dhaka is rapidly expanding in every direction, both



ILLUSTRATION: FREEPK

horizontally and vertically. Today, Dhaka is considered one of the most crowded cities in the world, and continues to experience an influx of migrants, particularly rural-to-urban migrants seeking work, with additional impacts on housing and transportation.

Does present day Dhaka represent the Shanghai of the early 1990s, as

suggested by Mr Zhu? It is hard to completely refute the assertion. Dhaka's civic amenities and public infrastructure, including transport, serve city dwellers very poorly. The growth of this megacity is increasingly taking the form of suburban satellite cities with no affordable transport infrastructure. The city is currently spreading towards the north, to Savar, Tongi and

Joydebpur and as far as Kaliakair, due to the presence of garments factories and special economic zones.

To date, Rajuk has taken no serious efforts to create a planned city; as a result, Dhaka has been growing according to its own demand without any real plan for transformation into a global city. Such transformation requires new infrastructure and urban

transport systems on a massive scale worthy of a global city. On the contrary, those living in slums and *bastees* in Dhaka are constantly subjected to forced eviction and displacement. Lately, the government has devoted some attention to the growing need for affordable mass transit—for instance, the ongoing construction of the Bus Rapid Transit, the Mass Rapid Transit and the Dhaka Elevated Expressway.

Given this scenario, how do we evaluate Mr Zhu's remarks regarding the future eastward expansion of Dhaka City? Is there any such potential for eastward expansion of Dhaka across the Balu and Sitalakshya rivers, offering the chance of establishing a Pudong-like city? Mr Zhu may not be aware that an eastbound expansion of the city around the Dhaka Eastern Bypass was discussed as early as 2000 among development partners. I recall attending a presentation by the World Bank in Dhaka specifically on the eastward expansion of Dhaka. The rationale behind the construction of the Dhaka Eastern Bypass was that it would offer relief from annual flooding and inundation to a huge area of wetlands of Beel Belai, and eventually allow the area to be developed to ease the pressure on Dhaka. The eastward expansion of Dhaka is still a very real possibility; with great potential for even further future expansion. However, other equally potential options—for

instance, expansion across the Buriganga River to Keraniganj and beyond as far as Mawa or to the southwest across the Padma Bridge to Shariatpur and Madaripur—should be carefully studied. The decision for the site for the new international airport by the current government will indeed define the future course of expansion and growth of Dhaka City.

Dhaka must grow and develop as a world-class city. It will require huge foreign investments, proper planning, new policies, capacity, technical knowledge, leadership and political commitment to make Dhaka a truly global city. Any expansion of Dhaka must benefit all city dwellers in terms of jobs, affordable housing, education, health services, transport and other basic amenities. The miracle of Shanghai should not easily sway us. We must consider and recognise the social and environmental costs of such mega development. The laws and regulatory framework in these areas are currently very weak. Any move toward the Shanghaiisation of Dhaka without adequate social and environmental safeguards will create untold despair and miseries. By definition, a global city must meet global standards when it comes to safeguarding the people and the environment.

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Mohammad Zaman is an international development specialist and advisory professor at Hohai University, Nanjing, China. E-mail: mqzaman.bc@gmail.com

A WORD A DAY



PAREIDOLIA
noun

A psychological phenomenon in which the mind responds to a stimulus (an image or a sound) by perceiving a familiar pattern where none exists

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Annoys
6 Flight unit
11 Bring together
12 Therefore
13 Does some modifying
15 Have bills
16 Game caller
17 Quarterback
Manning
18 Vegan's no-no
20 Fall behind
21 Play part
22 Old German capital
23 Wander off
26 Family fights
27 Study all night

DOWN

1 Bit of gossip
2 Blown away
3 Favored
4 Bastille day season
5 Opposite of open-

28 Maze runner
29 Lamb's father
30 Like a cabin on a cold night
34 Pub pints
35 Top card
36 Lyricist Gershwin
37 Be daring
40 Filmdom's Eastwood
41 Left Bank sight
42 Ranch workers
43 Carries

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6 Mine section
7 Toe Count
8 Poet Maya
9 Reykjavik's nation
10 Quits
14 Put in the oven
19 Sir's counterpart
22 -- noire
23 Satisfy an itch
24 Refrain bit
25 Small baking dish
26 China's region
28 Loaded
30 Almanac info
31 Permitted
32 Dancer Castle
33 Stuns, as a perp
38 Halt
39 "The Matrix" hero

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

N A S A L S C A R
E L I O T H O M E Y
E L I O T A G A V E
D O T S L R T E A
S T E P L A D D E R S
L I P O U S T
S A T U P C U R E S
A T O M J A G
S T E P F A T H E R S
S I N I N N L A T
E M A I L A L I T O
S E I N E P E T E R
S L A T S E E D Y

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

MISS BUXLEY IS A SWEET PATOOTIE

GREAT GAMS

A HUMDINGER

HAND ME THE DICTIONARY

I WANT TO SEE IF I'M BEING INSULTED!

GREG+MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

I'M GLAD YOU FEEL THE SAME WAY ABOUT KID BEAUTY PAGEANTS.

IT'S NOT FOR US.

DOO MUCH FOCUS ON PHYSICAL BEAUTY.

SHE'S TOO YOUNG FOR THAT.

WHY RISK INFLECTING EMOTIONAL SCARS?

RIGHT. THAT'S WHAT JUNIOR HIGH IS FOR.

PRIZES! PRIZES! PRIZES!

PRIZES! PRIZES! PRIZES!

PRIZES! PRIZES! PRIZES!

PRIZES! PRIZES! PRIZES!