



SPOTLIGHT

Speed

The idea of Bangladesh was successful after the Liberation War and again was not successful. But we got a strong smell of victory, which still remains.

— Shahabuddin, artist extraordinaire

For those growing up in postcolonial times, there was no escape from the tumultuous events that unfolded before them. Not a witness to the savagery of the Second World War, but of a world polarised as its direct result, Shahabuddin and thousands of youth like him — still not desensitised to brutality, cruelty, and war as we are now — could not hide their frustration while attempting to strike a balance between what is right and

same nation, but also saw the despair in the eyes of his preceding generation for a dream that was by then shattered to pieces.

Once active in the battlefield, Shahabuddin was no stranger to the atrocities of war and the dehumanisation caused by it. The struggle for Independence of Bangladesh was a battle fought at all frontiers — from ground armed resistance, to well executed propaganda, and astute international diplomacy. Although each aspect of this collective effort was necessary in achieving freedom, an attempt to draw comparisons is irrational, to the point of becoming naive.

The spirit of Liberation is what drew all to

they were destined to face.

Young Shahabuddin did not shy away from resorting to warfare when it was deemed necessary. The watershed moment for the 21-year-old aspirant artists was the Liberation War, the armed struggle he voluntarily joined. This inevitably left an undelatable mark on his psyche, and something from which he could never escape. Arguably all of his post '71 works are testament to that experience.

Shahabuddin — the man — sees no glory in war, yet one can still argue that he is not a staunch pacifist. This ceases to exist as a paradox of his mind once you bring the notion of 'justice for all' into the equation.

harmony that never fails to create an appeal in the minds of the viewers.

The jolted body, limbs stretched and muscles protruding, his warrior is always in perpetual motion. Shahabuddin is unique in the portrayal of kinetics in visual form, one that makes the Fighter leap through time and space, out of the canvas, and break through the walls of the gallery.

The struggle to move forward into the unknown is a hallmark, as is the figure's valiant effort to break free from every possible event, or chains that binds him to the present.

At times when he toys with other figures shying away from the human form, Shahabuddin paints a bull, or a galloping horse, never aggressive, and even if they seem deceptively so, a closer examination reveal that the underlying theme is always a strife.

His admiration for Bangabandhu — the Father of the Nation, Gandhi, and St Teresa, are clear and well recognised, and their philosophy and social stance finds a new meaning in the canvas of Shahabuddin.

Sullen but never grieving, the portraits somehow serve as a lesson on human existence. As it seems, Shahabuddin is merely a media, a messenger, passing on a legacy.

There can be little doubt that Shahabuddin is a 'compulsive optimist' who abhors despair in any form, even when the tyrants seem to overwhelm and rule over the oppressed.

The art of Shahabuddin is personal, yet the vibe, unmistakably universal. His canvas does not reflect his roots but his journey through time. There is an underlining nationalistic rhetoric, and elements from his role as a freedom fighter, but Shahabuddin is not tormented by the ghosts of his past, rather an artist immersed in an emancipatory vision.

By Mannan Mashhur Zarif
Photo: DS Archive



what is not; between violence and passivity; between war and peace.

In the then Pakistan, Shahabuddin Ahmed and his peers not only witnessed disparity between the two wings of the

join the struggle. Having said that, the war was possibly more disturbing for the fighters on the ground, who received little military training, and no psychological exercise to come to terms with the brutality



His identity of a warrior and a peace lover is just an indication to the pluralism of the human mind, and more so of Shahabuddin, the artist. While it could have been a hindrance for most painters, this conviction became the forte of his artistic expression, and now, Shahabuddin's signature.

One of topic that the artist regularly revisits is the image of an anonymous 'Freedom Fighter,' which is now an iconic symbol of his life's works. His canvas is always large than the larger-than-life fighter; the thickness of the ink from his paintbrush brings the imagery out of the two-dimensional canvas to a 3D reality. His fast-paced brush strokes and use of vibrant hues with trailing wash creates an unmistakable