



Embroidered handkerchiefs on which family members have shared their innermost thoughts about their loved and lost ones.



# REMEMBER THE DEAD, FIGHT FOR THE LIVING

## Smriti Katha O Kotha (Memorial Quilt) Exhibition

On April 20, Bangladesh Garment Sromik Samhati organised a unique “katha” exhibition in front of Rana Plaza to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Rana Plaza collapse, showcasing the moving work of 15 artists who had lost a family member to the worst industrial disaster to date. Photographer **TASLIMA AKHTER**, who is also the chair of Garments Sramik Shamhati, shares with us the process of curating this unique exhibition.

April 20, 2018—The space in front of Rana Plaza is unrecognisable. The tiny makeshift shops that dot the area are no longer there—like every year, the police have cleared them out ahead of April 24. Instead, there are five bright floral-printed hand-stitched quilts made of old saris draped across the plot that once used to house four factories. One of the quilts is placed on

the ground over a bedframe, while the others stand straight, bound in picture frames. Curious crowds begin forming from the moment we start hanging the exhibits, wonder apparent on their faces. The reason: the quilts have pictures of Rana Plaza victims sown onto their centres, on colourful *gamchas* (towels made of local fabric). On the sides, there are embroidered handkerchiefs on which

family members have shared their innermost thoughts about their loved and lost ones.

On one end of the framed *katha* is displayed deceased Akhi's yellow dress with red piping—it had been her favourite. After her death, Akhi's mother had preserved the dress. Many other such clothing items are on display at the exhibition “*Smriti Katha O Kotha*”. Each stitch and each word sewn on the *katha* reflect the love, affection and grief of those who lost their loved ones, and call upon us to not forget April 24.

“May we forever remember April 24”, “Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim. My Akhi left me on April 24, and never returned. Will she return ever? May her memory live forever”, “Hare krishno hare Ram, he left us on April 24, we are very sad

without him”—many more such thoughts inscribed on the handkerchiefs, albeit with incorrect spellings, were not easy to express for the toiling members of the working class who, even when they get a chance to learn, do not get the opportunity to practise writing. We did not attempt to correct any ‘mistakes’ in their compositions. As organisers, we were careful not to impose any standard on the artwork that would make it lose its authenticity.

In front of the exhibition, tags of different brands—needles and thread, buttons, scissors and other materials—are displayed in a long stretch, similar to how they were scattered all around Rana Plaza after the collapse. These are interspersed with

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The quilts have pictures of Rana Plaza victims sown onto their centres, on colourful *gamecha*.

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slogans written on cloths—“Want punishment for Sohel Rana and other culprits”, “We demand changes to the compensation laws”, “We don’t want another Rana Plaza”.

It has been five years since the Rana Plaza collapse, but perhaps many have already forgotten the terrible atrocity of the murder of a thousand lives and dreams. We had been thinking of a meaningful way to commemorate the memories of those lost—what would move people and make them remember, while at the same time inspire them to stand united to demand justice for Rana Plaza? In this regard, activist and

historian Robin Bersan’s Memorial Quilt project provided us with a muse. In 2011, on the centennial of the Triangle Sweater Fire in New York, Bersan had created a memorial quilt. Later, after Tazreen and Rana Plaza, he had also created memorial quilts to remember those lost in these industrial disasters. Through many a discussion, Robin and I collaborated to curate this project together.

However, there are notable differences in the *katha* sewn for those in Rana Plaza and Robin’s memorial quilts. The *kathas* in this exhibition showcase the traditional sewing techniques and patterns of different areas of Bangladesh, and each artist’s is unique. This arrangement to commemorate April 24 does not highlight any particular well-known artist but a group of unknown

artists, each of whom are members of a deceased or missing worker.

All of them are women, although men too have helped. For instance, missing worker Beauty’s husband Alam Matobbor composed the words “*Akashete lokkho tara jhiki miki hashe, goto rate shopne dekhi Beauty amar pashe*” (A thousand stars twinkle on the sky, and I dream of Beauty by my side), which were sewn on a handkerchief by their daughter Farzana. Female members of 15 families created the artwork—Rahela Khatun, Fazle Rabbi’s mother; Supriya, the relative of the missing Shamapti and Nirmala; Selima, the sister of missing Shantona; Farzana, the daughter of missing Beauty; deceased Shirin Begum’s friend Khadija; deceased Israfil’s wife China Begum; Shunnobala Das, the

mother of deceased Sanjit; deceased Poly’s mother Shahana; deceased Khaleda’s mother Ayesha Begum; deceased Shahidul’s wife Khadija and deceased Aakhi’s mother Nasima, among others.

Of the five collected *kathas*, three of them are from workers’ families. One of the two remaining ones was sewn by my own mother Begum Zebunnessa, who gave it to me nearly 30 years ago.

Five years on, the culprits of Rana Plaza still run free, while workers’ labour continue to be sold on the market at the lowest rates. The workers are calling for a dignified life with a monthly salary of Tk.16,000. This exhibition is not merely a call to remember the lost ones, but also to remember the living and to fight in solidarity with them. ■



Activist and historian Robin Bersan’s Triangle Fire memorial quilt.



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Family members of the workers made bright floral-printed hand-stitched quilts out of old saris.

