



KANAK CHANPA CHAKMA Portrait of an artist

Given the heights of the art world she has reached, it is obvious that her name follows a long list of prestigious accolades and exhibitions in Bangladesh and abroad. Let us, then, not even go there. But if we mention just one — the very fact that Kanak Chanpa Chakma is an Ekushey Padak recipient this year, one of the highest civilian honours of the country, speaks volumes about her work. Hence, we met up with her recently to explore her work and life at large — to capture the portrait of the artist herself.



As soon as you enter her home and studio, you will immediately feel that this is indeed the space of an artist, particularly that of Kanak Chanpa Chakma. A canvas depicting a woman of an indigenous community in Bangladesh — her signature theme — stares back at you. Stacks of paintings lie here and there. Buddha statues adorn her house. Blobs of paint have made their mark on the floor. Several cats lazily sit around the cosy home.

Amidst all that, an amicable Kanak Chanpa Chakma welcomes you. Over a birthday cake (it was her birthday the day before), we began.

“When I close my eyes, my mind takes me back to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where I was born and brought up. As I stand in front of the canvas, I feel an urge to work on that part of my life,” she replied as to why she ardently portrays indigenous people in her paintings.

Hailing from Rangamati, she saw the beauty, joys, and sorrows of the people in the region, and as an artist, she passionately and boldly stuck to her roots.

The result of which, I reckon, was the development of her own style, surrounding a rather unique theme.

It is not that other artists before her never attempted to depict the culture and lifestyle of various indigenous societies in Bangladesh, but I would opine that what makes her work special is the scale, depth, and volume she has offered to the audience. In all beauty, she has presented the lives of indigenous peoples to the whole of Bangladesh and beyond the country's borders as well.

Females from indigenous communities frequently come to life on her canvas. “I see women as Durga,” she said. “I portray them as a symbol of strength. I do not want to see them as neglected or weak. They are often the central characters of my paintings.

Through my work, I want to tell their stories, contributions, and their dreams and feelings.”

Whilst doing that, she has also put forth a wide range of aspects — sights of the beautiful hill tracts, fashion, and so on.

To illustrate, a woman is seen in her traditional garb. Sometimes, she is carrying a basket on her back. She may fancy a flower tucked in her hair. Jewellery of various shapes and forms adorn her further — bangles, necklaces, earrings, etc. — all with a touch of the elegance and uniqueness of her culture.

“Some people may say that this is for times of festivities. But even in their daily lives, women like to wear ornaments and traditional dresses,” she explains. “Of course, during festivals and celebrations, they can take things further, but I have seen my grandmothers donning rather large nose pins regularly and when going about their regular work and chores.”

And flowers too. “Let's say a woman is going to work, and she comes across some beautiful flowers. She'll simply pluck one off and put it in her hair. It is a very common sight,” the artist described.

She feels that there are numerous stories and a huge wealth of information to be presented about the indigenous communities of our country, lamenting that a lifetime is not enough to portray all of that.

“There is so much diversity in

Bangladesh! Diversity enriches a country. They say that a garden does not look very nice with just one kind of flower. A garden is richer when there are many different kinds of flowers, instead of just one type,” she said.

And she added, remembering her deceased husband (notable filmmaker Khalid Mahmood Mithu), that he was a huge support in her life and career, and that he inspired her to go very deep

play of colours! Such illumination! One cannot express in words the beauty of that scene. It is only possible to show it visually.”

On a separate note, as an artist, she is a morning person. That is when she prefers to work, contrary to the popular belief that creative people usually work late nights. She is an artist, not detached or isolated from reality at all, hence breaking yet another baseless cliché for you!

In fact, she finds herself busy with many endeavours. For example, she is the founding president of Ethnic Art Foundation Bangladesh, an organisation that provides support and platform to indigenous artists of various fields.

Meanwhile, from acid survivors to the third gender population to autistic children to rescue animals, she is involved in tackling a diverse range of issues that our society faces.

And surrounding all these is of course her extraordinary career as an artist,

earning her numerous awards, including the recent Ekushey Padak.

Sharing her thoughts on it, Kanak Chanpa Chakma said, “My country has officially given me this recognition. It is a matter of huge joy. As a painter belonging to an indigenous community receiving this award, this shall be a source of inspiration for the next generations. I feel that my responsibility has increased. There is a long way to go and there is so much more to do!”



into the hill tracts to further explore the cultures of the region.

On the other hand, the theme of Buddhism also sometimes appears in Kanak Chanpa Chakma's artworks. For her, it is not religion per se.

“With this line of paintings, I essentially want to represent peace,” she elaborated. “As a child, I used to see groups of monks come out and collect food in very early mornings. The sun is just rising. The monks are clothed in orange garbs. A splendid

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Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed