



While a lot of S M Sultan's work has been documented, many are also lost to time.

# 100 YEARS OF S M SULTAN

A tribute to the avant-garde artist behind Bengal's 'Renaissance'

**Sheikh Mohammed Sultan (better known as S M Sultan), is widely regarded as one of the greatest artists of the Indian subcontinent. His impressionist works, vigour, and movement of brush, the gracefulness of the figures, their worldliness and sensual beauty are completely free from any sort of mystifying symbol apart from the inherent logic of aesthetics. They bear ample testimony of Renaissance paintings, as said by Ahmed Sofa. An avant-garde artist, Sultan chose peasants as his muse. His works depicted their stoic valor, power of survival, and unceasing commitment to the land. On his 100th birth anniversary today, The Daily Star pays tribute to the life of this extraordinary art maestro.**

DOWEL BISWAS

In the early 1950s, a bohemian wanderer, a mystic painter arrived at Narail with no earthly possessions. Losing all that he had of his ancestral land, this vagabond and bachelor started to live in a bucolic environment with an adopted family of pets.

He was usually adorned in a long black kurta, and a scarf. The people of this vicinity got accustomed to listening to this long-haired, tall, handsome figure's hypnotising flute on the shores of the mighty Chitra River at night. This painter – who constantly created magic with his brushes, homemade matte earthen colors, and large jute canvases and lets it all rot and ruin after finishing the paintings, unbothered, unconcerned – is a singer and dancer too.

These people had no idea that this man – whom they affectionately called Laal Miah – deliberately preferring the company of cats and teaching rural children, had his work featured in the finest art institutions of the USA and Britain alongside maestros like Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, Matisse, Vincent Van Gogh – some of the

greatest in the world of arts.

However, this was the narrative and lifestyle Sultan always preferred. Son of a mason, and farmer by heart, he preferred and chose the simplicity of his people and the soil and created melodies of struggle, strength, and resilience with his bold brush strokes.

Even after acclaimed and acknowledged all over the world, including India, Pakistan, the USA, Britain, and Europe, Sultan's artworks before the 1950s remain a mystery as most of these could not be traced due to his nomadic nature.

This artist threw his celebrity status, acclamation, and even his paintings behind and came to the then Bengal, only to find himself disqualified to be a teacher at Zainul Abedin's Government Institute of Arts in 1948 because he had no academic certificates, only to find himself to be perceived as "a painter who cannot even hold a brush" by some critiques, according to Ahmed Sofa's discourses.

His very simple but highly philosophic art, which is revealed in nature and the people of Bangladesh, has become the prime source of inspiration for the new generation of painters. Mario Palma, an eminent



PHOTO: COURTESY OF NASIR ALI MAMUN

art critic (author of *L'arte che non dorme*), wrote about Sultan in his *Tales of an Art Lover*, "In my humble opinion, Sultan is the greatest interpreter of the soil and spirit of Bangladesh... The figures of the Sultan are truly fascinating and unique in the contemporary art scene."

Sultan's characters were farmers, rural women, children, animals, and even pets. His depiction of deprived, oppressed, and struggling humanity boldly looking toward the future with hope, vigor, and confidence with such ungodly structures and mutations tells the tale of strength, resilience, and empowerment.

Professor Burhanuddin Khan Jahangir, in his seminal work on Sultan, says, "Then who really is Sultan? A hidden Picasso? An undiscovered Vincent Van Gogh? In him, Sultan combines both. Maybe even more..."

In an interview with Weekly Prahar on May 6, 1987, Sultan neither confirmed nor denied his stylistic comparability to Picasso in his quiet but articulate manner.

He said, "There are some differences between Picasso and me. Picasso shifted from figurative art

to non-figurative art, and I shifted from non-figurative art to figurative art. Picasso painted a picture of the violence inflicted on Guernica. I painted a picture of sacrifice."

Sultan took little care of his finished works, and many are lost. He was unconcerned about using materials that would preserve.

Apart from being awarded prestigious awards, accolades, and being featured in top art institutions, Sultan received wide press coverage and laudatory critical reviews in renowned newspapers like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Telegraph*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, and many more. He became internationally acclaimed as a great painter of classic dimensions. Sultan received the Ekushey Padak, Swadhinata Padak, Bangladesh Charu Shilpi Sangsad Padak, and other prestigious awards.

The master painter died in 1994, leaving behind a myriad of known works, including *First Plantation* (1975), *Char Dakhal* (1976), *Harvesting* (1986), and *Fishing-3* (1991), and assumedly hundreds of other masterpieces which have been lost to time.

## NEWS

### BNP-Jamaat knows nothing but violence

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The PM made the comments while declaring another 12 districts and 123 upazilas free of homelessness and opening the distribution of 22,101 houses among the poor under Ashrayan-2 project through a videoconference from the Gono Bhaban.

Hasina said her government has relentlessly been working for the people.

"We know we've an opposition party here. They do misdeeds such as killing people and arson attacks."

The premier was connected virtually with the beneficiaries

and locals of three places while distributing the houses among the landless and homeless families on the sixth occasion since Mujib Year.

Hasina said the voting and democratic rights of the people were snatched after the assassination of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975.

She said the ruling Awami League, taking like-minded parties on board, waged movements and struggled for many days to establish the democratic rights, including the people's right to vote.

"Today the people got back their

voting rights and democratic rights," she said.

Hasina said that during her tenure, Bangladesh has gained the status of a developing country; the poverty rate dropped to 18 percent from 41 percent; and the extreme poverty rate fell to 5 percent from 25 percent.

"Inshallah, there will be no extreme poor anymore in this country."

The PM asked the people to keep their faith and confidence in her government.

PM's Principal Secretary M Tofazzel Hossain Miah conducted the function.

### Syncing with int'l markets

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with the three-month average of the international prices.

In addition, the official stated that local prices will reflect the average exchange rate of the dollar over three months, as well as premiums, shipping costs, import duties, banking fees, operational losses, storage costs, and the profit margins of distributors and refuelling stations.

The Daily Star has learnt that the formula was prepared after a delegation visited India, which introduced dynamic fuel pricing in 2017.

Some Indian states set fuel prices every day while others do it every month.

An official who was among the delegates, said the authorities were

still discussing whether to adjust the local prices every quarter or every month.

Quarterly adjustments may sometimes put pressure on the consumers, officials said, adding that monthly adjustments will make it easier for the people, and rein in inflation.

A top official of the ministry told The Daily Star on Sunday that the government was trying to choose the right time to announce the dynamic pricing formula. "The prices have been rather high in the international market in the last three months, and the government will wait until the international prices fall."

Contacted, the BPC Chairman ABM Azad said dynamic fuel pricing

was still in a preliminary stage.

"Nothing has been finalised. The decision will have to be made by the ministry," he said. "If the ministry asks us to introduce the formula today, we will. However, the government needs to think about all the implications and impacts of such a move."

Asked about the flags raised regarding the profit margin, he said the BPC had not made any proposal about its profit margin in writing.

Zakir Hossain, additional secretary of the energy division, who is leading a team working on the formula, told The Daily Star that the issue was "nearly finalised".

Asked if the formula will be implemented from September, he said, "We hope so."

### 53 percent thinks Bangladesh

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Those who made positive comments spoke of overall development of the country, improved living standards, advancement in digital technology, better economy, construction of Padma Bridge, better law and order, improved transport system and educational development.

Those who said the country is going in wrong direction mentioned price hikes, more corruption, one-sided government, lack of democracy, lack of jobs, poor law and order and political instability.

"My husband's salary did not increase, but the price of daily commodities is increasing daily," a

focus group participant said.

Only 26 percent respondents said the economy of Bangladesh would get better in the coming year. This is a sharp decline from 54 percent in 2019.

Also, the people who think political stability would get better are only 22 percent, a decline from 43 percent in 2019.

The survey says Bangladeshis are interested in voting in the next national election if electoral transparency and fairness are improved.

Ninety-two percent of respondents said they are likely to vote in the next national election (57 percent answered "very likely"). Those who do not intend to vote cite election fraud and voter

registration issues as key barriers to voting.

A plurality of 44 percent supports the return of caretaker government election system, but a majority also believe the opposition should join the election regardless of election administration.

"It is encouraging to see public support for free, fair, and competitive elections," said IRI's South Asia Director Steve Cima.

"These findings underscore the fundamental desire of Bangladeshis to have a real choice at the ballot box this winter," Steve added.

Bangladesh is expected to hold national elections in December this year or January next year.

### Houses, shops of Jubo Jote

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to the case statement.

After the news of Sanjay's death spread across the upazila in the morning, a group of unidentified people vandalised and torched Mostafizur's office in Kacharipara area around 10:30am, according to eyewitnesses.

The attackers then rushed to his home, in the same area, and set it ablaze. A two-storey building, owned by Mostafizur's late uncle, was also vandalised.

His brother-in-law's two-storey house was also vandalised and set on fire in Rathpara area of the town.

Contacted, Mostafizur's brother-in-law Shahidul Islam said, "About 50 to 60 people came with sticks and iron rods,

broke the main gate and ransacked the house."

Later, the attackers blockaded the Kushtia-Daulatpur region road by burning tires.

On information, police rushed to spot and tried to disperse the agitators, resulting in a clash between the two groups, said locals and witnesses.

Shops, educational institutions, and several other establishments were kept shut from 10:30am to 1:00pm in Bheramara town due to violence. Vehicular movement in the area was also halted.

Contacted, Zahirul Islam, officer-in-charge of Bheramara Police Station, said, "We are investigating the incidents to find who were involved."

### Islami Bank tightens lending

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from Tk 4,772 a year earlier.

As on June 30, its deposit growth was 1.09 percent and credit growth was 9.68 percent.

Subsequently, the bank has been failing to meet the minimum levels of cash and liquidity in the first half of the year, according to Bangladesh Bank officials informed on the proceedings.

For failure to maintain the minimum levels of cash and liquidity, the penalty is 9 percent and 8.5 percent of the shortfall amounts for the day respectively.

Islami Bank, where Chattogram-based conglomerate S Alam Group owns the majority stakes, faced a penalty of Tk 162 crore between January and June.

Earlier in June, when unveiling the monetary policy for the second half

of the year, BB Governor Abdur Rouf Talukder named five cash-strapped Shariah-based banks, including Islami Bank, and said the banks needed to improve their financial health by September.

Mohammed Monirul Molla, managing director and chief executive officer of Islami Bank, could not be reached for comment.

"We have already met our SLR shortfall – we are now facing CRR shortfall but that would go away soon as well," said a top executive of Islami Bank on the condition of anonymity as he is not authorised to speak with media.

The current liquidity crisis will end within the deadline imposed by the regulator because the deposit flow is "good now", he said, adding that the bank's remittance flow also increased in recent months.

### They want instability

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reasons may be is that Bangladesh's position is now much better. Successive governments under the leadership of the Awami League made significant economic progress over the last 14 years, he added.

The minister said the main issues for discussion on the elections in those 22 countries are economy, creation of jobs and inflation.

"In our country, I would say economy should be the main issue for discussion ahead of an election. So, highlight the economic issues. These are the issues of future. I would draw

your attention to highlight ways of maintaining the economic growth. The rest are irrelevant."

He suggested all should speak about Bangladesh's socio-economic situation during 2001-2006 and compare it with the socio-economic progress made in the last 14 years.

The minister said AI trusts the people and the country will be stronger with their support. He said the government is there to take care of the people and ensure the development and welfare of the country.

"The importance of foreigners should be minimal," Momen said.

### 'I was in a frightening situation'

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website, which keeps track of extremist groups' activities, on June 15 last year, while a second one surfaced on September 7 of the same year.

Sufiul, field security coordination officer (Head) of the United Nations' Department of Safety and Security, was kidnapped in Southern Yemen in February last year.

He retired as Lieutenant Colonel from the Bangladesh Army in 2005, and had been working with the UN since.

Sufiul was abducted while returning from a professional mission and remained in Al-Qaeda custody for one and a half years.

"I found myself in an incredibly fearful situation that words cannot adequately describe – a situation resembling scenes from movies. I was confined within hills and deserts, deprived of the sight of the sky and open air for months."

He credited the NSI for rescuing him along with his four colleagues

"I think they targeted me to realise their demands since I am a UN official," he said, adding, "I was kidnapped by a notorious terrorist group, and I am unable to disclose everything in detail for security purposes."

Asked whether he would continue his job despite the risks, he said, "As a member of the armed forces, it is my duty to take such challenges, and I will not back away from that."

Imrul Mabud, director of NSI, claimed no ransom was paid in exchange for the release. However, the captors had demanded \$3 million in this regard.

"With help from friendly nations, his release was secured."

He, however, did not elaborate on the process of the release citing security grounds.

The official expressed gratitude to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, whose instructions, he said, played a pivotal role in getting Sufiul released.