

Editorial

New Year celebrations are a vital part of the Bangladeshi culture. Historically speaking, the *Mangal Shobhajaatra* (rally) organized by the Faculty of Fine Arts may be a recent event, but it has become a very popular one among Bengalis worldwide. Thus, this issue of *Art of Bangladesh* covers the *Mangal Shobhajaatra* - its beginning and its growth until today. We hope that Mohammad Asad's research on this is both useful and enjoyable to all our readers.

Apart from this, the current issue carries its regular sections - Art Events, Jolrong News and This Month in the History of Art.

Unfortunately, we have once again had to delay the release of this month's issue. But we hope that our readers will understand and overlook the technical difficulties of a new born newsletter.

We not only welcome reader responses and suggestions, we thrive on it. It is thus important that you do not hesitate to tell us anything you feel about *Art of Bangladesh*, and help us not only by your readership, but also by your involvement in the newsletter.

Warm wishes.

Shawon Akand
Editor



A glimpse of the *Mangal Shobhajaatra*, Dhaka, 2008.

Ushering in the New Year with Charukala's Mangal Shobhajaatra

Mohammad Asad

Mangal Shobhajaatra or the "Auspicious Rally" depicts the festive spirit of Bengali culture. And the rally on 1st Baishakh by Dhaka University's Faculty of Fine Arts is a festival in itself. Many wait the entire year to participate in this artistic event that completes two decades this year. The rally's popularity has now spread to the different suburbs of the country, and even across the border among West Bengalis. In order to understand why this parade is such a rage amongst Bengalis, it is important to know its history. Now this history is divided into two parts - the Jessore episode and the Dhaka episode. Revisiting this history, this article will focus on the onset and evolution of this rally, and also its successes and shortcomings.

The Jessore Episode



These artists desired to involve art in the betterment of the society at large.

A scene from the *Mangal Shobhajaatra*, Jessore, 1986

Even though the most elaborate parade now happens in Dhaka, its story began in Jessore where it is still celebrated with great fanfare. Let us see why and how it happened.

It was 1985. The military dictator Ershad was in power. Degeneration and decadence were rampant in all spheres of the society; the most inflicted being the education sector. This was when some young students graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts (then Institute of Fine Arts, Dhaka University) and returned to their home district. Among them were Mahbub Jamal Shameem, Hironmoy Chanda, etc. who on their return established *Charupeeth*, a fine art education institute. Mokhesur Rahman, although not a native of Jessore, joined hands with them in their effort. Likewise, so did many other prominent artists like Hamiduzzaman Khan.

Here, it is important to point out that before this, many attempts had already been taken to open such an institute in Jessore, but in vain. This was due to the fact that S. M. Sultan was approached to represent the institute, and he being the bohemian that he was, refused to be tied down by commitments of this sort. But he did talk of art as establishment and encouraged others to make art an integral part in the daily life of the country. So Sultan's philosophy and ideas along with Dhaka's Fine Arts Institute established by Zainul Abedin acted as inspirations for artists in Jessore. Besides, they were driven by their own ideas too. They aimed at two things. One was to decentralize the Dhaka centered contemporary practices and trends in art by opening art institutes throughout the country. They basically wanted to minimize the gap between urban and suburban/rural practices and make art a nationwide discipline. Their other goal was to establish artistic values in all the stratas of Bangladeshi society. And by doing so, these artists desired to involve art in the betterment of the society at large. *Charupeeth* thus gave them the foundation to pursue new paths to fulfil these dreams. Initially, they started by working with children. Since the *Charupeeth* artists were young and ambitious, they did not lack the pep to experiment, research, and reach out to the nation with new ideas and new efforts. And so, Jessore started enjoying exhibits of renowned artists. The audience base also began to grow. However, the organizers were not happy with just this. They felt that viewers were missing out on a more joyful event, which could happen only when a variety of art forms and trends

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could be presented to them. This idea conflicted with that time's practice of solo performance in the country. So the *Charupeeth* artists started working on changing the scenario by arranging a group exhibition. Meanwhile, February 21 arrived, bringing in people from different places in the society who all joined in the festivities. Sadly though, each was seen holding their own banner, employing all kinds of attention grabbing antics. It was merely business, and not a united spirit of celebration. This prodded the *Charupeeth* artist group to plan a different kind of festival where people from all classes of the society could participate and work together. It would not be a festival for let's say, just Muslims or Hindus or Christians or Buddhists, but one where all would celebrate unity in diversity. So for this, they picked the Bangla New Year. And for the celebration of 1986, they chalked out the plan for a procession for which they employed forms and ingredients from Bengali folk art.

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The Shobhajaatra in Jessore, 1986

Thus, with the leadership of Shameem and Hironmoy, students of *Charupeeth* began preparing for the festival. Those who were the most active included Moniruzzaman Shipu, Golam Dastagir Mithu, Shamimur Rahman Shamim, and Firoz Rayhan Rumi. Dance and music/singing were being taught months ahead of the event. Then on the last night of *Chaitra* (the last month of the Bengali year), the whole city was decorated with Alpana, just like it is done to celebrate February 21. For the procession, masks resembling fairies, flowers, birds and tigers were made along with hundreds of head decorations such as crowns. Everyone who joined the procession on Pahela Baishakh came dressed in all this fancy finery. All kinds of people came forward to take part in it, and so began the Baishakh Shobhajaatra in Jessore in 1986.

From then onwards, this event gradually spread to other areas of Jessore outside *Charupeeth*. It became popular even outside the city, in other towns and districts. Even today, Jessore celebrates New Year with such pomp. Dhaka followed suit a few years afterwards, and Dhaka's story is equally fascinating.

The Dhaka Episode

People differ in their accounts of how this practice began in Dhaka. According to the one by Jessore's *Charupeeth* artists, this is how it all started:



The drums, the dancing and ten paper horses lifted the gloom off the campus and brought everyone together in one sensational celebration.

A glimpse of the Mangal Shobhajaatra, Dhaka, 2008.

It was 1988. Dhaka had still not seen the New Year procession when the Shameem-Hironmoy duo returned there to study M.F.A at the Fine Arts Institute. By this time, students of *Charupeeth* - Shahidul Islam, Shubhashish Mazumdar, Firoz Rayhan, Shameem Iqbal Ripon, Moniruzzaman Shipu and others also enrolled themselves at the Institute. During that time, there were a lot of conflicts between students in the Institute. So the *Charupeeth* group decided to turn the Institute into a productive but fun place to study. They decided that for the then upcoming Zainul memorial festival, they, along with like-minded artists like Mahbubur Rahman and Saleh Mahmud, would surprise everyone with a procession where everyone would dance along with local drum beats (*Dhaak*). Now this plan was kept secret, and they were confident of a pulling off a similar success stunt in Dhaka as in Jessore. This proved to be true; the drums, the dancing and ten paper horses lifted the gloom off the campus and brought everyone together in one sensational celebration.

To keep this trend going, the *Shobhajaatra* was organized the following year too. In February, Mahbub Jamal Shameem and his colleagues from Jessore had talks with other young, aspiring students of the Fine Arts Institute. And thus, artists like Sakhawat Hossain, Kamal Pasha Chowdhury, Bipul Shah, Saleh Mahmud, Shahid Ahmed, Ahsan Habib, Faridul Kader, Faruk Elahi, Najib Tareque and many others promised to join hands in keeping the procession alive. Some ex-students also came forward, among whom were Tarun Ghosh and Saidul Haque Juise. The former was an expert in Bengali folk art, and helped students make masks. He demonstrated how masks in Bengal do not express fear, but only joy. The other, Juise, a favorite of Mustafa Monwar, also taught how to make masks by folding paper. Apart from these people, young teachers of the Institute like Nisar Hossain and Shishir Bhattacharjee also extended their assistance.

Now those artists of Dhaka who have been associated with this event in the city from the very beginning differ in their version of the story. Because according to them, Mahbub Jamal Shameem and Hironmoy Chanda were never an important part of the 1988 procession, at the Zainul festival. They add that the huge pencils, brushes and paint tubes that were prepared for the occasion were in truth instrumented by the then 2nd year students of the Fine Arts Institute. And that encouraged by the success of the procession, they put together folk elements in a bigger show next year in 1989. The Dhaka artists in fact, confirm that the first procession in Dhaka was never fashioned after one in Jessore. However, they concede that while they themselves were brainstorming for a more festive procession in 1989, the news of a similar event in



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Inside the Fine Arts Institute premises, artists assemble the larger than life sized folk figures and objects

The Mangal Shobhajaatra, Dhaka, 2009

New Year with a rally that did add extravaganza to the event at the same time helped its spread around the country.

For the first year's parade, artists made ten small horses, a large elephant and fifty masks. Tarun Ghosh designed the posters. And although news of this preparation did not get much public promotion, people still thronged the procession in great numbers. Ever since, there have been many much bigger celebrations in Dhaka where many big artists participated at different times.

Now every year, preparations begin right at the beginning of *Chaitra*. Every year, the graduating students of the master's program do the lion's share of this preparation. Many older artists also join this flurry. Begins the sale of pot or shara paintings to raise money. Inside the Fine Arts Institute premises, artists assemble the larger than life sized folk figures and objects. Masks are also made using different media, masks that later become home décor in urban homes. These constituents of the *Mangal Shobhajaatra* have attracted much attention from aficionados.

The fire spreads everywhere

After the practice began in Dhaka, the procession also spread in many places like Barisal and Mymensingh. Now, most Bangladeshi districts have their own *Shobhajaatra*. For instance, Bipul Shah's home Netrakona welcomes the New Year with it. Another large, first *Boishakh* function takes place in Kishoreganj, Saleh Mahmud's hometown. Both these artists remain in their hometowns during the entire month before New Year in order to personally oversee the preparations. They work hand in hand with the locals, bring out the procession, and then return to Dhaka. This practice of landing a procession has also been adopted by Bengalis abroad. The latest is that Bengalis at Rabindra Bharati, West Bengal and those in the United States or Europe also celebrate New Year this way.

The last word

The ideas of a few young artists in 1986 have come a long way in the form of this *Mangal Shobhajaatra* everywhere. The artists had wanted it to be a celebration for every Bengali irrespective of class or beliefs, for all artists working in different branches of art. And that is exactly what *Charupeeth* is still holding up in their works. Their hope that it will reach people in all corners of the country, although still not completely fulfilled, has still given the middle class a festival of their own. This does not mean that one never sees people from other classes in the processions; in fact, sometimes even foreign nationals are seen dancing along with us.

This Bengali celebration can be traced back to the festivities revolving around the opening of the *Haalkhata* or ledger on New Year's Eve. Other festivals that may have influenced the New Year event were festivals to bid farewell to an old year and certain other indigenous New Year's rituals (*Charak*) that are eventually dying out. So in a sense, *Chhayanaut's* New Year arrangement of a morning of singing at the Ramna *Batamul* plus the *Shobhajaatra* together have become the spirit of a middle class Bengali New Year. And this has been made possible because of the secular nature of the festivities and the things used to compose it. For instance if we look at the kinds of motifs and ingredients used for the parade, we find that despite their origins in particular religious ideologies, they have transcended their communal connotations and become parts of a secular consciousness.

Author's Note

Most information used to write this article was orally transmitted because surprisingly, and perhaps unfortunately, not too much print literature exists on the subject. Also, for brevity's sake, we have had to leave out names of many people who significantly contributed to the popularizing of this festival. Nevertheless, we are grateful to them as well as the few we have been able to mention here. We are sure that each of them at different times has helped in making this event this big and this successful. It will be our honor if this article is therefore seen as a launchpad for re-constructing the history of *Mangal Shobhajaatra*.

Acknowledgement

Mahbub Jamal Shameem, Hiranmay Chanda, Mokhlesur Rahman, Tarun Ghosh, Saidul Haque Juise, Najib Tareque, Syed Gulam Dastagir, Bipul Shah, Saleh Mahmud, Zafar Iqbal Jewel, Nasimul Khabir Duke, Sakhawat Hossain, Mahbubur Rahman.



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Editor's Note

If in this skilful yet preliminary efforts to recreate the history of *Mangal Shobhajaatra* the author has worked within a limited scope, he could not have avoided it. Therefore, the limitation of incompleteness is natural. *Art of Bangladesh* has adopted this initiative to further research on this subject. And if there is any among you who has a story to tell about their and other peoples' involvement in making this history, we would love to hear from you. And if you possess any documents (journal, letter, photograph, cut out article, etc.), we would be equally interested in them. Apart from this, if anyone of you wishes to publish an article or a comment on this one, *Art of Bangladesh's* next issue will gladly cover it.- S. A.

Art Events

Mustafa Zaman's world of fantasy



A major portion of Zaman's work deals with how modernization, instead of pushing progress, has only intensified decadence

Zaman's attention has always been directed towards inequalities in the society. He mesmerizes viewers with a shock of fantasy that identifies discrimination and mocks it. However, compared to the ruthlessness and discomfort of his subjects, his lines are pretty simple and yet sharp enough to scratch the eyes out of a 'modernized' world. A major portion of Zaman's work

deals with how modernization, instead of pushing progress, has only intensified decadence; and how capitalism twists and turns our society and its people to satisfy its ever increasing needs. Lines find prominence in his works, just as do simple colors. He is known to even use unusual colors with great finesse. This mellows down his otherwise piercing commentary on the current state of the world. An exhibition displaying such extraordinary works of Mustafa Zaman recently took place at Dhanmondi's Bengal Gallery of Fine Arts from March 8 to 17.

"Kagojer Chhaya"



The puppeteers in the latter case may be rarely visible, or if visible, may never be recognized.

Bangladesh's leading daily Prothom Alo recently celebrated its 10th anniversary with a large exhibition of works done with paper. Wakilur Rahman and Dhali Al Mamoon displayed works that delineated the everyday tales of a leading newspaper. Paper boats and beds were here, there and everywhere in this exhibit. Emphasizing on the role of a newspaper in disseminating truth, the artist duo introduced

subjects that either hold on to truth as their final straw or that are marionettes in the grips of an invisible power. The puppeteers in the latter case may be rarely visible, or if visible, may never be recognized. The same puppeteers eventually also get to define and control a newspaper's activities, until the day when it is the newspaper that begins to control them in turn. To say all this and more, Wakilur Rahman created a special piece of work – a paper orb announcing Prothom Alo's 10th anniversary in calligraphy. Commemorating the bitter-sweetness of both its successes and strifes, Prothom Alo's celebrations raged between March 20 and 30 at the National Museum's Nalinikanta Bhattashali gallery.

Padma Puran – Mansur-UI-Karim



Common laborers populated his canvases, as if animate in joy and sorrow.

From March 20 to 31, Bengal Gallery, Dhanmondi, exhibited Mansur-UI-Karim solo. Karim is the recipient of this year's Ekushey Padak, the most prestigious civilian award in the country. Common laborers populated his canvases, as if animate in joy and sorrow. Having lived many years in Chittagong, the artist has been doing this series over a considerable amount of time. And yet each of his exhibitions has something new to give. This particular one's novelty lay in the portrayal of a river – Padma. Out of brilliant colors surfaced the

relationship between Padma and its surrounding land and people. Karim used such bright hues of red and green for the first time in honor of the beauty of Bengal.

Jolrong News

● Jolrong.com has recently turned its office into a home gallery. This of course does not mean that office work has been shifted elsewhere; in fact, the website team is in love with its office environment even more now. Visitors can drop in any time to enjoy the wide expo of artworks that cater to different people and different moods. The display changes regularly, and both young and senior artists get the privilege of flaunting their works in the halls of jolrong.com office.



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- From March 25 to April 7, Galleria 919 at Pakistan's art capital Karachi hosted "Bohemian", an exhibition of 9 Jolrong artists - Mahmudul Haque, Abdus Shakoor Shah, Kazi Rakib, Nasreen Begum, Pradip Kumar Chakraborty, Goutam Chakraborty, Anukul Mojumder, Biplab Biprodas and Shawon Akand. The Honorable Deputy High Commissioner of Bangladesh to Pakistan, Saquib Ali, inaugurated the momentous event that began jolrong.com's association with this new, prestigious art gallery. This being Jolrong's first international feat, the response from the Pakistani art community was massive.

This Month in the History of Art (March-April)

In Bangladeshi Art

- February 22, 1952 was supposed to hold the inauguration of Dhaka Art Group's second exhibition. But on the 21st after the police opened fire on a student procession, things went out of hand and the exhibit was delayed until between March 11 and 30 at the National Museum, Nimtoli. It was inaugurated by Lady Viqarunnesa Noon.
- On the night of March 25, 1971, the Pakistani armed forces killed Shahnewaz and Amit Basak, students of Art College (present Faculty of Fine Arts, Dhaka University), and a clerk named Nona Miah.
- In March, 1974, among the events that were held to celebrate the silver jubilee of the Government Art College, an exhibition was also held where Quayyum Chowdhury and Shahabuddin Ahmed received awards.
- In 1975, the first National Art Exhibition was organized by Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy from March 16 to April 15. Captain (Retd.) M. Mansur Ali, then the Prime Minister of the country, inaugurated the exhibit where Murtaja Baseer, Aminul Islam and Syed Jahangir received awards.
- In 1977, The National Art Exhibition of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy started on March 26. Quayyum Chowdhury and Mansurul Karim were awarded in this exhibit.
- A two-month long workshop on printmaking started at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy from March 12, 1979. Manirul Islam conducted the workshop.
- From April 4, 1981, Mohammad Kibria's solo exhibition began at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy.
- The The 3rd Asian Art Biennale began in Dhaka from April 6, 1986, involving 490 works by 316 artists from 15 countries. A seminar also took place during the same time. Among the Bangladeshi award recipients at the event were Alak Roy and Shahabuddin Ahmed.
- Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy organized the 4th Asian Art Biennale from March 1 to 30, 1989. 494 artworks from around the world got displayed at this event that was accompanied by a two-day long seminar. Alak Roy was the only Bangladeshi artist to receive an award.

In Foreign Art

- 14th April 1452- Leonardo Da Vinci was born.
- 30th April 1832- Edouard Manet was born.
- 8th April 1973- Pablo Picasso passed away.
- The last Dada gathering was organized at Saal zur Kaufleuten on April 9, 1919. This was a performance held to bid farewell to the Dada artists who were leaving Switzerland for good.
- In this month, 1919, The first "Free Art Exhibition" was held in Japan as a move to encourage free art education in the country, following the concept of Kanae Yamamoto, who was a renowned Japanese artist and proponent of this movement.
- In April, 1984, Noir and another French artist painted the Berlin Wall with some of the major works ever done on it.

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