

CONTEMPORARY BANGLADESH



AD MAN BLUES BECOME ARTIST LIBERATION

Very few utensils inhabit the cafeteria of the Bitopi advertising agency – mostly it's a holding room for a ping-pong table. On the wall behind it is a giant wall painting of a Dhallywood liquid movie poster. Splashed in day-glow concentric colour flows are the Bangla words 'Da Deadline'. A piss-take on irritated agency clients and the ember-frozen dhishoom Bangla film, the wall is a private joke. A recent art show flyer 'It's In The Paper' has been defaced to 'SHIT's In The Paper'. In a third corner, a movie poster of a giant Nordic man in battle mode. The title of this film is *Eric AasChe* – 'Eric is coming', Eric Aas being the former CEO of largest mobile company Grameenphone/Telenor (five of the top Bangladesh mobile phone operators are majority foreign owned and the un-integrated expatriate is a familiar and foreign presence).

Courtesy of old-lion agency Interspeed is another bizarre mix of ads on our TV screen. Celebrating the arrival of mobile phone towers to Chittagong Hill Tracts, the last area of Bangladesh that lacked phone coverage, these are willfully naive imaginaries of bucolic Pahari life. The colourful costume mela sets the tone for a fetish-ready tourist postcard. Hidden in plain sight is the history of an intermittent, 30-year guerilla war for the regional autonomy of the Jumma people – blind spot of Bangali nationalism. No space for people who look and talk nothing like us, but yes useful as props for regional sports meets. They sing, they dance, they wear colourful costumes (only disappointment is that they don't go topless). Look closely at images of smiling 'chinkie' boy and he is wearing an unmistakable army camo t-shirt. Given the fraught history of the Bangladesh Army as a pacification force in the hills, it seems a particularly twisted joke. I credit Interspeed for making image war a flatline element in daily work.

For the longest time, people complained about art school graduates heading to the agencies. Agency gula amader matha khailo. Mobile co's were the villains, but also British American Tobacco, Lux Soap, Rexona Sunsilks, Pran Mango, and yes yes Fair & Lovely. But for the artists who have risen to head creative or intermediate toolster at boutique agencies, crafting a condom ad with an explicit reference to oral, while evading mullah squad, can be more subversive than cha-stall lampooning of wealthy art collectors. Recent history shows that when we get invited to establishment space of Shilpakala or Chitrak, or new money sheen of Art Club and Bengal Gallery, the work is a pale shadow compared to low-stakes excursions in the commercial world.

Consider Shishir Bhattacharjee, one of the gifted surrealists of the Shomoy generation. His solo show in 2008 after a seven-year break showed him as a bravura showman taking on the military industrial complex. But he is really known to millions through phenomenal editorial cartoons in the *Prothom Alo* newspaper. Mayor Khoka as Donald Duck escaping from the mud pit of politics reflects, in 2x2 column size, the flying man-reversed grass-living sandal-tanks on parade cacophony of his Gallery Kaya show. This creates entertaining frisson when a garments millionaire turned art collector comments that he doesn't collect cartoonists. Rafiqun Nabi (now dean of art school Charukala department) began this trend in the 1970s with his cartoon character Tokai, the beggar boy with savage barbs at Gulshan elites. But Nabi separated this wily creation from his formalist canvas work, a divide that led to wintry morning shrinkage.

Nisar Hossain of Charukala reminds me that Bangla artists have historically found expression within commercial work rather than galleries. From television set design (Mustafa Manawar, Keramat Mowla), to industrial product decoration (Qamrul Hasan), to book covers for a voracious publishing industry. Abul Kashem, Pranesh Mandal, Hashem Khan and Golam Sarwar for text books, and Qayyum Chowdhury for high literature. The exploding popularity of Masud Rana brought Devdash Chakrabarty's photo collage to penny dreadful James Bond. In a pre-Mac time, the thin outlines where the glue had not set brought runny lipstick perversion to teenage readers.

A recent show of Indian artists originally from East Bengal reminded the viewer of Partition's rupture on the art space. Artists of Hindu origin (Paritosh Sen, Atul Bose, Somnath Hore, Bijan Chowdhury, Ganesh Haloi, Jogen Chowdhury, Haren Das) migrated to or stayed back in West Bengal after 1947, leaving both a gap and opportunity. Zainul Abedin, a supernova in the Kolkata art scene and Communist Party for his famine sketches, was recruited to start a new art academy in East Bengal/Pakistan. On the reverse flow, Muslim artists Qamrul Hasan, Shafiuddin Ahmed, Shafiqul Amin, Anwarul Huq, and Khaja Shofiq moved to Dhaka from West Bengal. It was from Zainul's academy that the next generation of artists, from Aminul Islam to Rashid Chowdhury and Abdur Razzaque, began their work. Charukala started in 1940s, but local resistance to image-making (described as idol worship by the Islamist bloc) prevented the opening of a sculpture department until 1968. Fast-forward to the current and installation, video and new media forms are entering at a glacial pace – perhaps it's a slow art movement, far from madding crowds.

Art and politics collided with the recent controversy over the statues of Baul Sufi mystics outside Zia International Airport. ZIA is always a space for contentious visual polarity. In a nod to the brackish influence of Gulf oil money in local politics, the airport's main facade now has its name in Arabic, Bengali and English – in a country where no one speaks Arabic except in the rote memorisation each of us learned while reading the Quran. Fakir Lalon and his current heirs of Bauliana, with their cocktail of Sufi mysticism, Hindu-Muslim syncretism, god-complexity lyrics and local art scene embrace, has always been anathema to traditionalists. The placement of the statues adjacent to the airport Hajj camp gave the Islamists a pitch-perfect cause – graven images next to pilgrims in waiting. On the day before the 118th death anniversary of Lalon, the army government caved in to pressure and removed the statues. The photo-op of enthusiastic 'Islamist' activists joining government officials in pulling down statues seemed a photocopy of Satyajit Ray's prediction in *Hirak Rajar Deshe*.

Forced involvement in national politics is necessarily healthy for local artists, bringing them out of institutional navel-gazing into larger questions of image making, ownership and their role as public intellectuals. Like the protests that torpedoed Musée Guimet's planned loan of artifacts from Bangladesh museums, the Baul statue supporters used art venues as organising spaces. Ad hoc coalitions formed around poets, writers, academics and fusion musicians such as Anusheh and Buno. As this confrontation plays out, the mobilisation will open up larger questions of critical cultural dissent, as Bangladesh re-enters an era of security state, surveillance culture and militarisation. While cultural players fetishise pre-NGO rural life and produce flat paintings for nouveau buyers, the messy conflict of defending Bauls while accepting corporate sponsorship of Lalon Mela promises some creative friction.

Sitting in architect Salahuddin Ahmed's Café Mango the other day, I saw out the window the mystery graffiti punks who spray 'MS-13' and 'Khilafat Boyz' all over Dhanmondi walls. Is this a mystery public art project waiting for decoding? A melding of Islamism and mobile culture? Or will excavations reveal that it's a clever campaign for a new computer coaching centre? Whichever way, it's like the label on the Dry Amla bottle. Tasty & Digestive. And then the ingredients: 'Honey, Amla etc'.

It's that etc that gives the culture wars the bitter, fruity taste of sugar and arsenic.

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