

The Art of Bangladesh's First Handwritten Constitution: History and Significance

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ABSTRACT

On December 16, 1971, Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation after a long and arduous liberation struggle. Within just ten months, the country achieved a significant political milestone by drafting its first constitution. While it would have been faster and more practical to print the document using conventional press methods, the government made a symbolic and culturally resonant decision to create a handwritten version. This rare initiative was not merely administrative—it was also an artistic undertaking. Renowned artist Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin was appointed to oversee the creation of this manuscript version, enlisting the expertise of artists from the Faculty of Fine Art (formerly the Institute of Fine Arts) at the University of Dhaka. This initiative positioned the constitution not only as a legal document but also as a unique piece of manuscript art, integrating national identity with visual expression.

This research explores the historical context, artistic contributions, and aesthetic qualities of the handwritten constitution of Bangladesh. It investigates the role of the Faculty of Fine Art in this national project. It examines whether there is a deeper connection between the visual elements of the manuscript—its calligraphy, embellishments, and images—and the constitutional principles it enshrines. By doing so, the study aims to contribute to the broader understanding of how art and national identity intersect, and how the manuscript may have influenced subsequent developments in Bangladeshi art and cultural philosophy.

Keywords: Handwritten Constitution, Cultural Significance, Manuscript Art, National Heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh achieved independence on 16 December 1971. Less than a year later, on 4 November 1972 (1), the Constitution of Bangladesh was adopted by the Constituent Assembly after thorough discussions (The Daily Azad, 5 November, 1972, p. 1). It officially came into force at midnight on 15 December (2), effectively on 16 December 1972 (The Daily Sangbad, 16 December, 1972, p. 1). In just ten months, the newly independent nation managed to frame and finalizes its constitution—a swift and significant accomplishment for a country freshly emerged from conflict.

Though the document could have been easily printed, the government chose to produce a handwritten version—a decision both symbolic and culturally resonant. Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin was given overall responsibility for supervising the preparation of this handwritten copy. Artists from the Faculty of Fine Art (then the Institute of Fine Arts) were commissioned to interpret and inscribe the constitution visually, making it not just a legal document but also a work of art.

This research seeks to explore the history and significance of that unique endeavour. Why was Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin selected for this project? What connection exists between the constitution's foundational principles and its visual presentation—through calligraphy, ornamentation, and thematic elements? And how does this work reflect the Faculty of Fine Art's broader role in shaping Bangladesh's post-independence art and identity?

The article explores these questions while highlighting the artistic qualities of the constitution and the faculty's multifaceted contributions. It is structured in two main parts:

1. A historical account of the handwritten constitution's creation.
2. An analysis of the artists' roles and the visual forms used in the document.

Grounded at the intersection of art history, cultural heritage, and political symbolism, this research treats the handwritten Constitution of Bangladesh as both a legal text and a cultural artefact. Created soon after independence, it transcended its political purpose to become a visual symbol of national identity.

At the heart of the study is the constitution as a case of manuscript art, where legal text meets visual creativity. It is approached not solely as a document of governance but as a national artwork reflecting the ideals, aesthetics, and aspirations of a newly formed state. The study draws upon the original manuscript and interviews with contributing artists, supported by limited but valuable existing literature.

This inquiry is guided by four interwoven ideas that together explore the handwritten constitution of Bangladesh as more than just a legal text—it is seen as a living, artistic, and cultural symbol.

First, the Handwritten Constitution is considered a powerful, symbolic response to the urgency of state-building after liberation. Though it was published in limited versions and rarely seen, its very existence calls for us to rethink it—not just as a document, but as a national treasure that should be accessible and alive in public memory.

Next is Manuscript Art, where the constitution's calligraphy, layout, and visual flourishes are studied as meaningful expressions. Drawing from traditions like the Pala manuscript, the research explores how artists shaped this form, blending word and art into something deeply rooted in cultural practice.

The third idea focuses on Cultural Significance. The visual aesthetics of the constitution do more than please the eye—they engage citizens, deepen democratic participation, and reinforce national identity in subtle but powerful ways.

The fourth concept, National Heritage, frames the manuscript within the broader legacy of Bangladesh's independence. This research challenges us to see it not as a static relic, but as a living heritage—an evolving symbol of collective memory and people's rights.

This case study invites a rethinking of heritage itself—not just as something to preserve in glass cases, but as a dynamic, people-centred legacy. The handwritten constitution, in this sense, becomes both a mirror of the past and a vision for the future.



Image 1: On 5 November 1972, The Daily Azad published that the constitution is adopted by the constituent assembly on 4 November, 1972. Source: The Daily Azad, 5 November, 1972, p. 1.



Image 2: On 16 December 1972, The Daily Sangbad published that the constitution was effective from midnight of 15 December. Source: The Daily Sangbad, 16 December, 1972.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates Visual Culture Theory, Cultural Memory and Heritage Studies, Postcolonial Theory, and Institutional Critique to examine the significance of the handwritten Constitution of Bangladesh in the post-liberation context. These frameworks collectively enable a deeper understanding of how the constitution, as both a legal document and a work of visual art, reflects and constructs national identity, cultural memory, and institutional authority.

Drawing on the work of Nicholas Mirzoeff (2015) and Gillian Rose (2016), visual culture theory offers analytical tools for examining how visual elements, such as manuscript calligraphy, artistic embellishments, and layout, convey cultural and political meanings. This theory is used to explore the aesthetic choices embedded in the constitution's design, interpreting them as a visual narrative of nationhood and a symbolic expression of the state's founding principles. This directly supports the research question regarding the interrelationship between the constitution's principles and its visual/artistic form.

The frameworks of Jan Assmann (2011) and Pierre Nora (1989) allow us to position the handwritten constitution as an artefact of collective memory and national heritage. These theories emphasize how cultural artefacts serve as 'memory sites' that shape national identity and preserve historical consciousness. This helps to understand the constitution as a living symbol of Bangladesh's struggle, cultural identity, and post-independence aspirations.

Guided by Homi K. Bhabha (1994) and Edward Said (1978), postcolonial theory provides a site for analysing the handwritten constitution as a symbolic rejection of colonial practices. The decision to entrust the constitution's artistic representation to Zainul Abedin, a national figure rooted in indigenous art traditions, can be seen as a strategic assertion of cultural sovereignty. This theoretical lens supports inquiry into why Zainul Abedin was chosen and how the artwork reflects a postcolonial vision of independence and national pride.

And lastly, drawing from Michel Foucault's (1980) concept of power/knowledge and Hans Haacke's (1984) critique of institutional authority, this study examines the role of the Faculty of Fine Art as more than an artistic body—it was a political actor shaping visual ideology. The Constitution Project represents how state-sanctioned art was used to legitimize the formation of national values. This helps explain how the project contributed to the faculty's cultural and political importance, as well as the development of art philosophy and education in post-independence Bangladesh.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Following Bangladesh's independence in 1971, the newly drafted Constitution emerged not just as a legal framework but as a powerful emblem of national identity and cultural pride. While its political and legal dimensions have been extensively studied, the creation of a handwritten, artistically adorned version—led by renowned artist Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin and the Faculty of Fine Art—has largely escaped scholarly focus. This unique project bridged politics, ideology, and visual culture in a way seldom seen.

This research documents the history of the written process and addresses the gap in understanding the handwritten Constitution's cultural, artistic, and ideological significance, examining how it embodies the intersection of national identity, state formation, and the evolution of modern Bangladeshi art.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, historical, and interpretive approach to explore the artistic, institutional, and ideological aspects of Bangladesh's handwritten Constitution and why Zainul Abedin was chosen for the project. This paper is supported by primary sources, such as interviews, archival materials from the Bangladesh National Museum, National Parliament Library, and Agrashar Bikrampur Foundation, along with 1970s newspapers and publications. This research examines the political and cultural context behind the handwritten constitution.

For the Visual and Artistic Analysis, the actual handwritten Constitution was studied. The analysis focused on the Constitution's calligraphy, layout, illustrations, and symbols, using visual culture theory and art criticism to explore how its design reflects ideological principles such as nationalism, secularism, and democracy.

Unstructured expert interviews were held with senior faculty from Dhaka University's Faculty of Fine Art, associates of Zainul Abedin involved in the project, and the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee to understand the faculty's contribution. And finally, the study interprets findings through the theories discussed in the theoretical framework.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Given the historical nature of this study, access to original archival documents and the physical inspection of the handwritten Constitution were limited. Additionally, the study relies on oral histories, which, while valuable, may introduce subjective biases; these are acknowledged and critically assessed throughout the analysis.

There is also significant scope for further exploration, particularly of how a constitutional manuscript, arguably one of the most authentic forms of public art, has become a largely overlooked artefact. This neglect veils a vital piece of national heritage within the context of a politically vulnerable and undemocratic history. Such gaps invite deeper inquiry into the intentions and implications behind the project itself.

There remains scope to further explore several questions that are only briefly addressed in this study: Why was Zainul Abedin chosen for such a politically symbolic task? How do the aesthetic choices—calligraphy, illustrations, and overall design—reflect the Constitution's founding ideals? And did this artistic endeavour contribute to shaping the Faculty of Fine Art's post-liberation identity?

THE HISTORY OF EMBELLISHMENT OF THE CONSTITUTION

Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh was adopted by the Constituent Assembly on 4 November 1972 and came into force on 16 December of the same year, marking Victory Day. ... The Constitution has declared Bangladesh a Republic committed to the principles of democracy and human rights; rule of law; freedom of movement, assembly, and association; freedom of religion and international peace and harmony (Banglapedia 2023).

To realize these fundamental laws with an artistic presentation quality, the former Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibar Rahman invited Zainul Abedin and entrusted him to do it. Dr. Kamal Hussain said that they studied the constitutions of Commonwealth countries, which were then easily available (Hossain, 22 August, 2021). Artist Hashem Khan mentioned the Indian constitution, too, which was then shown in the press to maintain the printing quality, which helps to understand the working idea of the handwritten and decorated constitution (Khan, 8 October, 2022). The Constitution of India was handwritten and embellished by the work of artists (Legislative department, Government of India, 2025). And interestingly, the initiative was taken to write the constitution of Bangladesh by hand, too. This history of decoration of the constitution will be discussed in three steps such as preparation, design for decorations, and lastly, book design and printing.

Phase -1: Preparation



Image 3: The Daily Dainik Bangla on 15 January 1972, informed that the preparation of the draft constitution is going on. Source: The Daily Dainik Bangla, 15 January, 1972, p. 1.

“The draft constitution is being prepared” was the news on the front page of the daily Dainik Bangla on 15 January, 1972 (3). The page at a glance represents the phenomenon of the new nation. The headline “New Society: Socialist Economy” reveals the form of the constitution, and the red-marked advertisement also unfolds the marketing policy of the businessman. The Jamdani motifs used in this advertisement are also featured in the Constitution as decoration on the first page of Chapter 5, page 26.



Image 4: On 29 January 1972, The Daily Dainik Bangla informed that the draft constitution was prepared. Source: The Daily Dainik Bangla, 29 January, 1972, p. 1.

And on 29 January 1972, The Dainik Bangla confirmed that “The Draft constitution is Prepared” (4). This news informed, too, that within one month, the first session of the assembly will start. And regularly, newspaper shows the discussion on the draft and acceptance process of the Constitution. After approval of the Constituent Assembly on 4 November 1972, the pages of the revised section were rewritten by artist AKM Abdur Rouf to give it its

final shape. Then the members of the Constituent Assembly signed the handwritten constitution at the end (Huq, 2015, p. 167).

The above-mentioned information illustrates the working period during the drafting of the Constitution. Hashem mentioned that the artists took about three months to complete it and hand it over (Khan, 8 October, 2022). The other two artists mentioned that completing the design takes about one month (Alvi, 12 July, 2023; Chowdhury, 22 December, 2021). So, it could be said that just after completing the draft, the artist did not get involved or summoned by the working committee of the constitution. This assumption is strengthened by Zainul's illness, too. Zainul had been suffering from facial paralysis in 1972. He had undergone treatment in the country, but it was not fully recovered. That's why he went to London in the mid of April 1972 (Huq, 2015, p. 163).



Image 5: News on the embellishment of the Constitution. Source: The Daily Azad, 6 November, 1972, p. 1.

So, after the return of Zainul, approximately at the end of August, he was entrusted with the work of the constitution. Because, according to the daily newspaper “The Azad”- “A group of artists, design makers, and manuscript writers under the leadership of Mr. Zainul Abedin have been working for the past two months to publish the constitution” (The Daily Azad, 6 November, 1972, p. 1). This news was published on 6 November 1972 after the adoption of the constitution (5). Artists also shared that it was completed in a very short time — 18 designs for embellishments to the constitution were finished in about one month (Chowdhury, 22 December, 2021). Rouf joined as a calligrapher into the team after a decision led by Zainul Abedin. A memorial book on Rouf informed that it took three months of writing to print 500 copies (Nahar, 2011, p. 32). Because of this work, Rouf came and stayed in the country for three months. The constitution was handed over to the assembly at Ganobhaban on 13 December (The Daily Azad, 14 December, 1972, p. 1) (6) just before the day of the last assembly meeting, which started on 14 December (The Daily Azad, 14 December, 1972, p. 1) (7). So, by all means, it takes around four months to complete the work.



Image 6: A copy of the handwritten constitution was shown to former Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at Ganabhaban on Wednesday, 13 December 1972. Source: The Morning News, 14 December, 1972, p. 1.



Image 7: The constitution signed by the assembly members on 14 to 15 December 1972. Source: The Daily Azad, 15 December, 1972, p. 1.

As a consequence of these issues, there is a question: why did Sheikh Mujib entrust Zainul? There are two issues to understand the involvement of Zainul, very concisely. The first thing is that Zainul was a pride for the undivided Bengal, the Pakistan era, as well as for Bangladesh. The biography-based book ‘Zainul Abedin: Srishtishil Jibon Samagro’ proved this issue thoroughly. At the same time, Zainul’s context is studied by the researcher in detail, which proves enough that one pride is summoned to create another pride. Zainul accepted these assigned duties with sincerity. He went to work almost regularly (Mainul Abedin, 23 September, 2021). But Zainul also has his agenda, which he may want to realize by doing this work properly (Huq, 2015, p. 162, 169; Khan, 8 October, 2022). This agenda was the Folk Art Museum, which is also a national treasure now.

How did this artistic process start, and who is the conceptual artist? Dr. Kamal Hossain was 82 during this research. He said-

I don't remember at the moment which country's constitution was illustrated like this, but I saw it somewhere and thought that if our constitution is something we are going to sign, it should be in Bengali, so I arranged to have it handwritten. At the same time, since it is the main document of the state, it will be written by hand, so artists should also be given the opportunity to participate in it, especially our Zainul Abedin, who was active and supportive of the movement (Liberation War). As a result, artists were given opportunities. We were proud of our artists. ...Another idea was that if the artists take part in it, it would also reach the people well (Hossain, 22 August, 2021).

Which constitution was used as a model or source of inspiration from the initial drafting stage to the final printing phase? There is a hint in Hashem Khan’s interviews. According to him, the Bangladesh constitution was entirely done in a new style. The Indian Constitution was brought in as a reference (Khan, 8 October, 2022). In an in-depth conversation, he explores the connections between the Indian Constitution and the process of handwriting and artistically designing the Constitution of Bangladesh. He shared that, in the presence of Bangabandhu and some members of the drafting committee—including Dr. Kamal Hossain—when the issue of printing was raised, particularly regarding BG Press, some members expressed the opinion that BG Press would never be able to provide high-quality printing. Bangabandhu once listened to me and also looked at Shilpacharya. I again told everything in detail. I told the employees of BG Press firmly that the Constitution of Bangladesh would be printed much better than the Constitution of India, which I showed them. It is possible with all the equipment that BG Press has. Only the paper should be properly brought to us (Khan, 8 October, 2022).

As an art form, the constitution would look like what and how it will be accomplished can also be found in some of Zainul. As an example, his conversation with Bangabandhu-

Since the Constitution will be printed in two languages - Bengali and English. I think that if the Bengali version is printed in full handwriting rather than using a press type, there will be originality and novelty. Bengali press type is traditional and breaks often during printing. The English type is good, though. In our country, documents are written by hand. Some people write the documents on the premises of the judicial department. Remembering the tradition of the country, I am saying that if the constitution is written by hand, it will have a beautiful dimension (Khan, 8 October, 2022).

Hashem Khan reveals the history of a democratic art-making process. As a participant and a witness of history, he shared that in these circumstances, law minister Dr. Kamal Hossain said that Common people will not understand the writings of document writers except lawyers or legal people. Zainul assured that- “But the document writers will not write - one of our painters will write, whose handwriting is neat, clear, i.e., not sloppy like document writers” (Khan, 8 October, 2022).

Zainul’s researcher, Syed Azizul Haque, writes that the decoration of the constitution was done by artists Junabul Islam, Samarjit Roy Chowdhury, Hashem Khan, and Abul Barak Alvi.¹ The entire book is handwritten by artist AKM Abdur Rouf (Huq, 2015, p.167).

Among the artists, Hashem Khan and Abul Barak Alvi are alive. But during this research, Samarjit Roy Chowdhury was alive, too. Beyond the artists’ arena, the main supervisor and advisor of the constitution, Dr. Kamal Hossain, is also alive. So, this research gets a prime opportunity to meet the primary sources, although they are aged, and sometimes their memory is not working properly. That’s why, to avoid misleading information, they were very concerned, and for this reason, they suggested that the researcher skip many things from their sharing. All previous texts very briefly mentioned the information about the constitution. That’s why we have some vacuum, which also misleads history sometimes. In these consequences, firstly, history gets the prime attention.

Dr. Kamal Hossain said that they decided that the constitution will be written in Bengali (vernacular language) as like other commonwealth constitutions which they have already studied (Hossain, 8 October, 2022). Hashem Khan said that Zainul Abedin assigned him to make a primary plan before meeting Bangabandhu. Hashem Khan took 4/5 days to draft this plan. Soon after the preparation of the draft, Shilpacharya and Hashem Khan appeared at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s office - Ganobhaban with the then Law Minister Dr. Kamal Hossain. Before leaving for Ganobhaban, Shilapacharya sat at his Shantinagar residence and discussed some very important issues. After discussing the drawings of about six/seven people, it was decided that the design would be drawn by artist Junabul Islam, artist Samarjit Roy Chowdhury, and Syed Abul Barq Alvi. At that time, there was a discussion about the beautiful handwriting of artists in Bangladesh, named Quamrul Hassan, Qayyum Chowdhury, Kalam Mahmud, Pranesh Mondal, and Golam Sarwar etc. Sir Abedin said that the writing of each of them is beautiful, with different styles and characteristics. But, how would their (calligraphic) style be a logical fit for the Constitution (Khan, 8 October, 2022)? All issues were fixed in the second meeting. In the second meeting with Bangabandhu on the Constitution, the book design, printing, and related issues were finalized. About the presence of the 2nd meeting, Hashem Khan said-

Today, after so many days, I don’t remember everyone. Those who remembered are Syed Nazrul Islam, Captain Mansoor Ali, Special Member of the Constitution Drafting Committee Prof. Anisuzzaman, Mr. Mohaimien, etc. Mr. Mohaimien, then a member of the National Parliament, is also an expert in printing and the sole owner of The Pioneer Press (Khan, 13 July, 2022).

Hashem continued that during the discussion to fix the calligrapher, Zainul took out a folded newspaper from his bag and opened it in front of Bangabandhu. Every attendant eagerly looked at the paper. It was published in London during the Liberation War in 1971 (Khan, 13 July, 2022).² The magazine was entirely handwritten in Bengali. There was no press type anywhere. And at that time in 1971 in London, it was not even possible to add Bengali type. Therefore, without looking the other way, the matter turned out to be good. Some of those present had already seen the paper, especially Professor Anisuzzaman and Mohaimien Sahib. The artist of this handwriting is Abdur Rouf (Khan, 13 July, 2022). During the liberation war, Rouf rejected the government post of Pakistan

in London and was involved in the liberation war struggle on behalf of the independent Bangladesh government (Nahar, 2011, p. 17; Khan, 13 July, 2022).

When Zainul went to London for treatment in mid-April 1972, he stayed at the residence of artist AKM Abdur Rouf, who was working as an official of the Bangladesh High Commission (Huq, 2015, p. 163). Zainul had private contact with this student, even during his stay in Karachi (Huq, 2015, p. 158).



Image 8: Two issues of the Bengali periodical “Bangladesh Sangbad Parikrama” published from London. Zainul appears to have raised an issue with this newspaper during the meeting. Source: Mukti Joddha Shilpi A.K.M Abdur Rouf-Smarak Grantha. Nahar, Qumrun (Ed.), (2011). Bangladesh Film Archive.

Hence, it would not be incorrect to assume that Zainul was properly informed about Rouf's activities during the liberation war while he was undergoing medical treatment in 1972. And presumably, before going to London, Bangabandhu gave Zainul an idea about the workings of the Constitution, or Zainul collected the handwritten newspaper of Rouf (8) as his usual nature. And Zainul brought his handwritten journal to the Constituent Assembly as a sample of Rouf's expertise and thoughts on handwriting at that preparatory phase. So, Rouf was accepted unanimously as a calligrapher.

After finalizing the decision on the working process of the constitution, the artists began and completed their tasks at Sangsad Bhavan (the National Parliament premises). Currently, “That room does not exist. That building does not exist. The old parliament building was near the old airport. The work was done there” (Hossain, 22 August, 2021). Same sight with a detailed interior revealed by renowned artist Khan-

The workplace was in the Sangsad Bhavan. In 1972, Sangsad Bhavan was in Tezgaon, where the office of the Hon'ble Prime Minister is now. There we were—four artists—sitting on either side of a table. Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin sat at one end of the long side of the table, and Law Minister Dr. Kamal Hossain sat at the opposite end. There was a telephone on our table. In the same room, a medium-sized table by the window was arranged for the scribe Abdur Rouf (Khan, 8 October, 2022).

While sharing this thing, Hashem shared some situations that they experienced with Rouf from their daily working life. On the contrary, the book titled ‘Mukti Joddha Shilpi A.K.M Abdur Rouf -Smarak Grantha’ informed that Bangabandhu gave Abdur Rouf the secretary's room to sit and write. Because this room had an AC and was quiet, which was preferable for writing such an important text (Nahar, 2011, p. 29). Alvi said he did not sit there regularly, but sometimes he came to write (Alvi, 6 August, 2023). In the consequences of these sources, two facts seem to emerge. Though Rouf used the secretary’s room for the demands of the working process, there was a need to work together with all artists, too.

That’s why he also came to the Sangsad Bhavan for some time. Writing the Constitution by hand was a tedious task. Rouf has undoubtedly done this tiring job following the assembly discussions over the constitution. After completing the draft of the constitution, the constitution assembly finalized the draft over and over discussions in the assembly. So, it was a continuous process for the calligrapher, where text was dealt with by lawmakers, and Rouf followed the changing text as it was to document it correctly. As an artist, it was a great devotion, inspiration, and courage that might come from his previous activity during the liberation war. And it could be said that Zainul had chosen the right person for this enduring but responsible work.

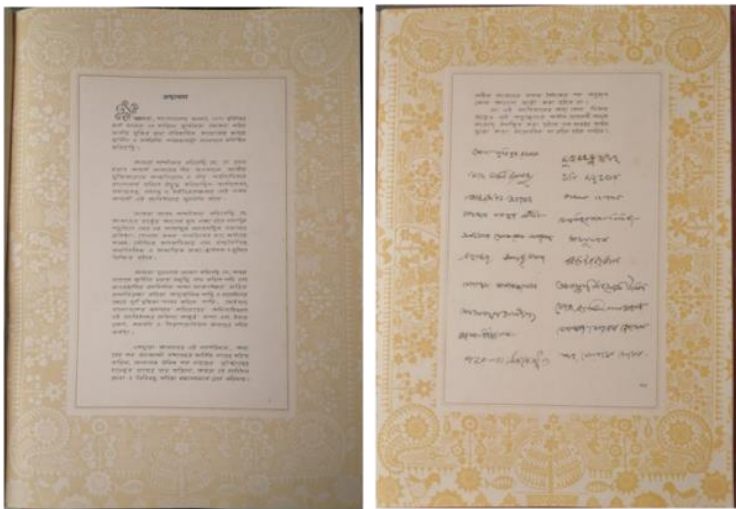
Phase -2: A Design for Decorations



Image 9: These 16 designs are used on the starting page of each new chapter or content. Source: The constitution of Bangladesh, preserved in Agrasar Bikrampur Foundation



Image 10: This design is used on the general pages. Source: The constitution of Bangladesh, preserved in Agrasar Bikrampur Foundation



Images 11, 12: The preamble (page 1) and the signature pages of the Constitution are decorated with designs by artist Alvi, featuring motifs from Nakshi Kantha, which are also used in Pustani. Source: The constitution of Bangladesh, preserved in Agrasar Bikrampur Foundation.

There are 18 types of design (9-12) with different motifs that have repeatedly been used on the 109 pages (The Constitution of Bangladesh, preserved in Agrasar Bikrampur Foundation). Thus, the narration ends on page 93. This page has only 6 lines. The constituent assembly's signature begins below those lines. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman signed the first (The Constitution of Bangladesh, preserved in Agrasar Bikrampur Foundation). Here, the cover page is not included. Without the table of contents, the total number of pages of the Constitution is 109. The first 8 pages (contents) are decorated with a single design that carries leaf motifs, shapla flowers, and creeping branches of shapla. A different single design is used on the 18 pages (1, 93-109); the prologue is written on page 1, the other 16 pages are signed by the members of the constituent assembly, and on the last page, the name of the artists is printed. And the other 15 pages (2, 4, 9, 17, 26, 43, 53, 57, 59, 64, 65, 73, 76, 80, 85) are decorated with a single design. The rest of the general 76 pages of the constitution (3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10-16, 18-25, 27, 28, 29-42, 44-52, 54-56, 58, 60-63, 66-72, 74, 75, 77-79, 81-84, 86-92) is repeatedly decorated with another single design. In this design, the artist used elongated mango-like leaves. In that way, a total of 18 unique designs were used to embellish the Constitution. These 18 designs are used to decorate the border lines of the pages. Within 109 pages, besides the ornamentations, 7 pages (3, 8, 25, 42, 52, 72, and 84) are decorated with the sketches of Zainul. These sketches are set below the text. Similarly, three pages (16, 63, and 75) are decorated with traditional pitha (pie/cake) motifs (The Constitution of Bangladesh, preserved in Agrasar Bikrampur Foundation) (13-15). These motifs of pitha are copied from the photographs of the original traditional pitha motifs, which were collected by BISIC (Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation). Photographs were captured by BISIC staff, too (Khan, 26 July, 2023).



Images 13, 14: Pitha (traditional pie) motifs are used to decorate the border of the text on page 16. A pitha image is also placed below the text. Source: The constitution of Bangladesh, preserved in Agrasar Bikrampur Foundation.



Image 15: Pitha (traditional pie) images are used in the decoration of the Constitution. Source: The constitution of Bangladesh, preserved in Agrasar Bikrampur Foundation.

The visual designs of the Constitution were executed by four different artists, each contributing in distinct ways. Hashem Khan organized the original designs to suit the book's format (Khan, 8 October, 2022). Through the interviews, two artists (Samarjit Roy Chowdhury and Abul Barq Alvi) expressed that the work period was a collective phenomenon, although they did each motif in a very singular way. And they were not able to memorize properly who had done which one. So, according to them, it's better than letting it be a collective work (Alvi, 12 July, 2023; Chowdhury, 22 December, 2021). That's why it was pretty tough to identify who worked on which motifs. Nevertheless, a few designs can be attributed to artists who are recognized by multiple members of the team. The design was drawn by the artist Abul Barq Alvi following the pattern of Nakshi Kantha, which was used in the permeable and signed pages (Alvi, 12 July, 2023; Khan, 8 October, 2022). This design was reprinted at the end of the Constitution, where the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—who, at that time, was more vibrant as the leader of the Liberation War than as Prime Minister—signed the document along with the members of the Constituent Assembly. A total of 398 people signed across 16 pages. According to Alvi, Nakshi Kantha motifs of Pustani were taken from Zainul Abedin's collection.



Images 16, 17: After the Pustani, the Shapla motif is used on the following page. On the page after that, the book title is decorated with a Shapla motif, and the national emblem is placed at the centre of the page. Source: The constitution of Bangladesh, preserved in Agrasar Bikrampur Foundation.



Image 18: National Emblem of Bangladesh, Source: Banglapedia, 17 June, 2021.

A design concept was planned by Zainul, and Alvi was entrusted to do this design for the prologue page (Alvi, 12 July, 2023). After the Pustani, the Shapla motif is used on the following page (16). On the page after that, the book title is decorated with a Shapla motif (17), and the national emblem (Banglapedia, 2021) (18) is placed at the centre of the page. Shapla motifs are used consistently throughout the content pages.

The national emblem is also used on the cover page, which is of leather work, in which shapla is a central motif. So, it is clear that the first design motif is taken from the national emblem of Bangladesh, which was designed by Mohammad Idris (The Daily Prothom Alo, 22 December, 2018).

Artist Samarjit Roy Chowdhury has created many new designs based on the Jamdani saree motifs, as well as various folk arts, including terracotta dolls and boat motifs. His Nakshi Pitha and Jamdani saree designs have been beautifully executed (Alvi, 12 July, 2023; Khan, 8 October, 2022). All four artists were aware of one thing—that the design and artwork should be fresh and complete with the atmosphere of Bangladesh. And this mindset was instructed by Zainul (Alvi, 12 July, 2023; Khan, 8 October 2022; Chowdhury, 22 December, 2021). Finally, all these designs were composed by Hashem Khan on the pages to maintain printing purposes (Chowdhury, 22 December, 2021; Khan, 8 October, 2022).

Hashem Khan also quotes Zainul Abedin in his interview, which clarifies this history. When Zainul Abedin handed over the constitution to Bangabandhu, he commented very modestly that, “...the BG Press printed it, and all the responsibility was on this artist Hashem Khan. I stayed with him... The beautiful designs were done by artists Samarjit Roy Chowdhury, Junabul Islam, and Abul Barq Alvi” (Khan, 8 October, 2022).

In 2021, Hashem Khan wrote that “Other artists who have done the designs for the Constitution are Junabul Islam, Samarjit Roy Chowdhury, Abul Barq Alvi and Abdur Rauf for calligraphy” (Khan, 4 February, 2021; The Daily Jugantor, 2022). Hashem Khan mentioned that other artists have done the decorative part. Samarjit and Alvi also mentioned that thing.

According to Samarjit Roy-

Hashem Khan was responsible for drafting the first constitution. I, Junabul Islam, and Abul Barq Alvi were engaged in drawing. And the writer was AKM Abdur Rouf. Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin was in overall supervision of our work. On the instructions of Bangabandhu, under the supervision of Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin, and under the responsibility of Hashem Khan, we did the work of drawing the constitution. Various designs of folk art, including kantha, fish, and boat, are visible on the pages of the constitution (Chowdhury, 22 December, 2021).

Syed Shah Shafi was an expert in leatherwork. Shafi was a draftsman in Sriniketan who later came to Bangladesh. He has done the cover of the Constitution. According to Mainul Abedin, the youngest son of Zainul Abedin:

The person who did the leatherwork used to teach at Sriniketan. He must have been an instructor there. He came to this country after 1971. My father must have seen his leatherwork and liked it. That’s why he was entrusted with doing the leatherwork for the Constitution. He used to supply organizations like Karika—there was a demand for jewellery boxes. My father was collecting leatherwork from him (Mainul Abedin, 23 September, 2021).

In 18 designs, local flowers like Shiuli (*Nyctanthes arbor-tristis*, page 57), Kalmi (*Ipomoea aquatica*, page 65), Persian miniature-like cloud motif (page 43), a bunch of paddies (page 73), Jamdani motif (page 26), pitha (page 53), etc., are used as motifs. Though the motifs are chosen from local cultural elements, as a design, those motifs are transferred to Persian miniature-like features. At a glance, the spectator will feel this visual essence.

Phase 3: Book Design and Printing

In the Constitution, the preamble, table of contents, 11 chapters, and MPs' signatures are divided into different designs. A specific design is used for the general pages (The original copy of the constitution, preserved in the National Museum). Designs are created with certain measurements, like a length of 4 inches and a width of 1 inch. According to Hashem, each artist does 9 to 10 designs. After selecting appropriate designs, it is used to decorate the constitution following the page dimension. That is, deciding how much of the page will have the design and colour scheme. In the middle, the text will be written on each page (Khan, 8 October, 2022).

Hashem added that-

Page size according to constitution size – 15.5/8 long x 11 inches wide (after trimming).

Design and colour layout (around the page) – 10.1/2 x 6.1/2 inches (outside)

Size of white space for writing – 9.1/4 x 5.1/2 inches (Inside)

If you fold the design vertically in the middle of the constitution page, you will see that it is the same on both sides. The design starts from the centre to the left and wraps around to finish at the centre starting point to the right. I decided on a method to finish each design perfectly. The 5-inch long, 1-inch-wide design drawn by the artists was copied 14/15 times by a photo camera and then assembled to the specified size. At that time, there were special cameras for copying these graphic designs and images. An ordinary camera could not copy it perfectly to the exact size (Khan, 8 October, 2022).

A graphic photographer named Abdur Rashid, who had a studio in Purana Palton named 'Rashid Graphic Photo Studio', was good at this job. Hashem Khan asked him to print the copies of the designs. Later in this work Offset camera was also used (Khan, 8 October, 2022).

The artists made the original design at only 5 inches x 1 inch. Hashem Khan designed the pages perfectly (Chowdhury, 22 December, 2021; Khan, 8 October, 2022). The colours are arranged according to the book design scheme. These designs have been done in a process similar to the colour printing in the Constitution. The initial and complete designs are done in black and white, and then different colours are arranged according to the book design (Khan, 8 October, 2022).

The printing press was the major issue after completing the design. The quality could have been ensured if printed on the Padma press. At that time, Padma Press was good at printing. Since the funds of the government of the newly independent country were very tight. It was risky to maintain the quality of printing in the other two presses. And the requirements of those presses were also high for the newly formed government. Therefore, the Government Printing Office, the abbreviated name BG Press, was finally selected.³

Books are printed according to the paper's and the printing machine's sizes. This size is called a format. Names of Formats: Demy, Double Demy, Crown, Double Crown, Royal, etc. The size of the Constitution of Bangladesh was more than the Double Demy size. Double demy can be printed 8 pages at once. However, since the size of our constitution was special, four pages had to be formatted and printed on a double demy machine.

First, two forma—that is, eight-page layouts—were created as samples to test the printing quality. Eight pages of text, written by artist Abdur Rouf, were used for this purpose. Then, according to the layout of the design, after several steps of the printing process, it is printed in four colours. Hashem Khan and Siddiquir Rahman were always persistent in getting proper colour and clean printing results. Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin has been in the press for two days and has observed everything in detail. After receiving the eight-page sample print, Bangabandhu

was delighted and excited as he turned through it. He said; Abedin brother - this is beautiful (Khan, 8 October, 2022)!

In this way, the printing issue was resolved, and the working process of the Constitution proceeded.

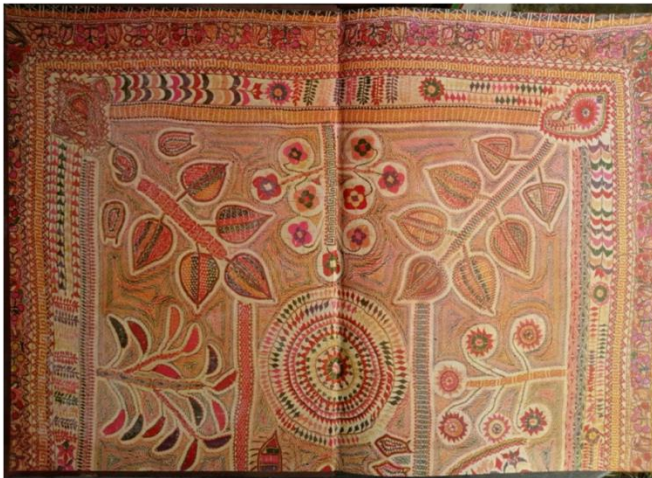


Image 19: Pustani (placed immediately after the cover). Source: The constitution of Bangladesh, preserved in Agrasar Bikrampur Foundation.

The cover page was designed with an ambush of golden colour. Two pustanis on the front and back of the constitution, Nakshi Kantha, were printed exactly. As mentioned earlier, in 1972, printing and craftsmanship were very difficult. Pustanis (19) was done by copying the colourful designs. Multicolour printing on the BG Press was very risky. So, Hashem Khan joined Eastern Regal Press to get the fair print of Nakshi Kantha on Pustani. Even after trying three times in a row, they could not print the picture of Nakshi Kantha. It can't even come close to the expected results. This particular Nakshi Kantha was a valuable folk art collection by Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin. Colour photography with a photographic reflex camera at such a large size (Pustani size-16 1/2" X 23") did not produce good results.

In that crisis moment, according to Hashem Khan, he applied his wisdom and strategy. The offset camera crew helps him. Going outside the tradition, Hashem pulled the Nakshi Kantha in front of the camera lens and took pictures with four negatives: red, blue, yellow, and black. Then, after adjusting the colour percentages, he exposed the positive film for each colour and calibrated the phases of the printing accessories with the experts, and then took the proof on the machine. Unbelievable results- 90% of the results were very satisfactory, even if not 100%. Eastern Regal Press officials and artists were delighted and surprised. Then he added one more essential colour to clarify the knots of the embroidery needle.

However, Hashem Khan mentioned in his interview that the BG press had a few workers who were very good at assisting him in the printing process. Hashem Khan himself assured that Mr. Siddiqur Rahman was a printing expert. Deputy Superintendent Siddiqur Rahman had a Diploma in Printing Technology from the Slade School of Art, England. "Talking to him, it was understood that he could print the correct meaning of the trusted constitution book" (Khan, 4 February, 2021; The Daily Jugantor, 2022).

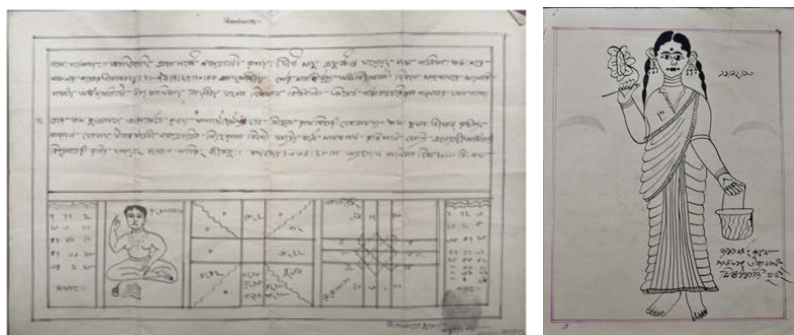
There is artist Aminur Rahman, too, the senior artist student of the first batch of fine arts education, who used to study with artist-teacher Aminul Islam; and the operator of the offset machine was Yasin Mia, perhaps this was the name (Khan, 8 October, 2022). Their presence and contribution were significant for this specific field to realize the good quality of printing. So, all the way, undoubtedly, it was a collective work that finally realized the Constitution as an art piece.

According to the Daily Sangbad (The Daily Sangbad, 6 November, 1972, p. 1) and Azad (The Daily Azad, 6 November, 1972, p. 1) newspapers, apart from the original copy, MPs also signed two duplicate copies. Of these, the original constitution is preserved in the National Museum, and two other copies of the constitution will be kept, one with the Prime Minister and the other with Parliament. For the first time, 500 copies (even though, on

3 November 2023, Hashem Khan mentioned to the writer about one thousand copies for each language) were printed of the signed original one (Nahar, 2011, p. 32). The English version was composed and signed by the members, too. The original two copies of both languages are preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka (The original copy of the Constitution, preserved in the National Museum). English original, thus not handwritten, but like the Bengali one, this is also covered by leather work (The original copy of the Constitution, preserved in the National Museum).

And finally, printed copies with handwritten ones were handed over to Bangabandhu on 13 December 1972. The last assembly started on 14 December and finished on 15 December 1972. During these days, signatures were collected (The Daily Azad, 14 December, 1972, p. 1), and 15 December was the last day of the assembly, too (The Daily Azad, 15 December, 1972, p. 1). Artist Hashem Khan and calligrapher AKM Abdur Rouf were present in the last constitutional assembly. Hashem was responsible for the Bengali signature; artist Rouf took the English signature (Khan, 8 October, 2022). The handwritten constitution was later kept in the museum, and all copies of it were made on the printing press at the Bangladesh Government Printing Office (Khan, 3 November, 2023).

FEATURES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EMBELLISHED HANDWRITTEN CONSTITUTION



Images 20, 21: Pages from Kosthi (Horoscope), Kishoregonj. Dates: 1364 Bangla (1957) and 1369 Bangla (1962). Source: Tarun Sarkar

Worldwide, manuscripts have a long tradition. It has a local variety format, too (20, 21). During the exploration of Islam, miniature painting explored the tradition of manuscripts. Persian and Mughal miniatures get priority from the very early phase in the modern art practices of the Indian subcontinent, by Abanindranath Tagore (Kumar, 2009).

The artist team of the Constitution academically was aware of the manuscript as well as the miniature paintings. The manuscript is very old and has known forms in all civilizations. Before the invention of the printing press, all documents were handwritten, and most manuscripts were also decorated. Artists experienced the richly decorated manuscripts—whether Pala, Mughal, Persian, Chinese, or European—through the lens of art history.

As a consequence of their artistic experience, under the supervision of Zainul, three artists created the design. Directly, these motifs or designs are not connected with the text of the constitution like the Pala manuscript (Saraswati, 1978), but with essence, where conceptually the motifs and images or sketches represent the newly born People's Republic of Bangladesh. The Constitution was the first collective work in the history of modern art in independent Bangladesh.⁴

Individual or personal identity is secondary here. It was the first state-sponsored book decoration in an independent country. Besides this opportunity, what artistic features are present in the work? There is another opportunity to view the entire work as a memorial to the concept of building a democratic state. Earlier, Zainul Abedin developed a collective approach to his work titled Nabanna by collecting signatures of others. But there was no artistic partnership. Signatures collected from viewers. It could be said that participatory and unclaimed art practices were initiated in the background of the liberation war movement. Biren Shome very explicitly

narrates this history in his book titled “Bangladesh-er-Swadhinota Sangrame Shilpishomaj” (Artists in the Independence Struggle of Bangladesh) (Shome, 2015). These practices culminated in the successful completion of the Constitution.

The artistic significance of the constitution is also connected with the importance of Zainul Abedin. Zainul reached an apex in his artistic career in the era of British India (Huq 2015).⁵ With that fame, he started his Pakistan era as an organizer, too. Zainul’s importance proved during this era, and he was given national responsibility. In 1968, President Ayub Khan formed the National Manpower and Education Commission to develop human resources and their use. Zainul’s opinion was also sought by the Commission (Huq, 2015, p. 141).

“Let’s work together to build a new nation”—this call was echoed by Dr. Kamal Hossain as well. That is why they took this initiative. As an artist, Zainul Abedin had his own vision for ornamenting the text. Hashem Khan shared the supervision process of Zainul-

We used to draw designs and show him each design. He used to give many suggestions and solve many things by addition and subtraction. No design went to press without his approval. He even used to see the writings of the artist Abdur Rouf. Often with Sir, I had to sit on design, writing, etc., also about layout and colour usage. Abedin Sir used to come almost every day and supervise various matters. Law Minister Dr. Kamal Hossain also used to come sometimes. Law Ministry official Mr. Majeed was in touch with artists (Khan, 8 October, 2022).

So, the administrative and artistic body- these two forms, i.e., lawyers and artists, jointly realize this venture for the new nation. After completing the work, even in the parliament, by collecting the signatures of the members, artists were honoured by the state power (Nahar, 2011, p. 49).

After all of these things, there is also a wish of Zainul behind the working process of the constitution. Azizul wrote that-After the completion of the design and decoration, when the constitution was handed over to Bangabandhu, he talked about Karupalli. (Huq, 2015, pp. 167-168; Khan, 2003, pp. 66-70).



Images 22, 23: Artist: Syed Shah Abu Shafi. This work (right) reminds us of the Nakshi Pakha (left). Source: from Zainul’s collection.



Image 24: Pie motifs. Source: Sonargaon museum collections.

In the meantime, I mentioned that Zainul was conscious of maintaining the local art style (22, 23). Even in decorating the Constitution, artists used the traditional pitha forms (24). Zainul had a collection of traditional pitha forms from Mymensingh. Samarjit Roy said that images of pithas from Mymensingh were used in the Constitution, following Zainul Abedin’s suggestion. He added, “Abedin Sir said, ‘Let’s do something rooted in our tradition’” (Chowdhury, 22 December, 2021). So, local art and the traditional art form were connected with

the objective of the liberation war phenomenon and Zainul's own dream project, which was later established in 1976 with the support of Bangabandhu.

Artists transform their local traditional motifs in a new way, which shows the artistic quality very keenly. At the same time, the features of those designs reveal the difference between the art of local artists and the art of urban and “modern” institutional artists, which was inspired by local art. Nevertheless, artists create very simplified designs that give a facile and mundane look to the Constitution.



Images 25 and 26: Similar to many of Zainul Abedin's paintings, this is one of the earliest examples used to illustrate the relationship between the recurring themes in his artwork and the sketches included in the Constitution. (From left) The first image was used in the Constitution, while the second—titled Harvest—was painted in 1948. Source: Falvo, Rosa Maria (ed.). (2012). Zainul Abedin, p. 156-157. Bengal Foundation & SKIRA.



Images 27, 28: (From left) The first image was used in the Constitution, while the second—titled Towing Boat—was painted in 1968. Source: Falvo, Rosa Maria (ed.), 2012, p. 241.



Images 29 and 30: (From left) The first image was used in the Constitution, while the second—titled Boat Race—is a sketch. Source: Zainul Abedin's family collection.



Images 31, 32: (From left) The first image was used in the Constitution, while the second—titled Returning Home—was painted in 1970. Source: Falvo, Rosa Maria (ed.), 2012, p. 248.



Images 33, 34: (From left) The first image was used in the Constitution, while the second—titled Struggle—was painted in 1954. Source: Falvo, Rosa Maria (ed.), 2012, p. 39.



Images 35, 36: (From left) The first image was used in the Constitution, while the second—titled Rebel Cow—was painted in 1951. Source: Falvo, Rosa Maria (edt.), 2012, p. 177.

With 6 sketches of Zainul, 7 pages (3, 8, 25, 42, 52, 72, and 84) are decorated below the text. Farmers carrying paddy (p.3), towing boat (p.8), cowherd towards home in Baishakhi storm (p.25), boat race (p.42), struggle to lift the wheels of the bullock cart stuck in the mud (p.52) and fighting bull (p.72, 84) —these six subjects are used in the 7 sketches. These sketches are not signed, though it was not a natural habit of Zainul. That means this anonymous position was intentional to keep a collective symphony. All of these subject matters came together in his painting Nabanna (1970), except for Boat Race. As if the scattered glimpses of rural Bengal are animated and woven together within Nabanna. Nabanna reads like a visual biography of Zainul Abedin's work—its spirit flowing into the Constitution as well. Though the sketch titled Boat Race offers a different insight into the planning behind these works, several similar sketches are found in Zainul's family and museum collections—suggesting they were carefully drafted. Those sketches are not known as paintings but as drafts. This suggests that Zainul did not fill in all the blanks haphazardly; rather, he was somewhat thoughtful in representing the economic and cultural life of Bengal. Or it can also be said that Zainul's artistic personality is seamlessly echoed in the constitution. This means that Zainul was confident about his personality and this work. There was no urge to think differently about this public property. Because Zainul has already established himself against the aristocratic history of art to create a new realm considering living people. But in this way, his artistic heirs learn to manage any creative project by following their own artistic style, without thinking of it as a separate artistic project. May be, for this reason, Zainul planned and completed these sketches (27, 29, 31, 33, 35) with a noticeable absence of female figures. In this way, marked by a conspicuous absence, the sketches construct a male-centred vision of a new nation, where the narrative of the zenana is keenly displayed and told (Datta, 2017).

Nevertheless, it can be said that most of the forms used in the Constitution from Zainul's sketches appeared repeatedly in his earlier works; nothing was entirely new. These sketches were adopted from his various previous works (28, 30, 32, 34, 36). Alvi mentioned that these works are not done differently for the constitution. In various ways, these subjects and compositions appeared throughout Zainul's work, from his early years to the end of his life. At the same time, an analysis of these works suggests that while Zainul repeatedly explored similar subjects and compositional elements, he redrew them with fresh intent, adapting the sketches to align with the character of the Constitution and its specific spatial context.

After all of these, the question is—Are these artworks or images used pre-planned, or just for filling the blank space? He sketches and uses pictures of pies on a total of 10 pages. All these did not show any planned way of working as part of the whole design. Artists' statements also support this presumption, which is the result of visual reading. Not pre-planned. Just after the completion of the handwriting, the blank/void space was decorated with some images. Zainul's sketches are just chosen from his various works to fill up the spaces (Alvi, 12 July, 2023).

But this state project—supported by both the cultural and administrative ruling classes—enabled mutual understanding, creating a bridge through which each side could explore its role in shaping the future nation. This phase also created a comfort zone that made space for another (Sonargaon museum) of Zainul's artistic dream projects—one that, in a broader sense, functioned as a national initiative tied to the future economic plan (Zainul Abedin, 1972; Interview of Artist Zainul Abedin published in Binodon, August, 1974).

Briefly, the following four points summarize what occurred through the embellishment of the Constitution:

1. A new relationship emerges between the state and the realm of art.
2. Through this work, a collectivist approach to art begins to take shape in the context of the new democratic state.

3. This collective effort is dominated by men, though conceptually it draws from the essence of folk life and folk art. Both Nakshi Kantha and Nakshi Pitha originate from the world of rural women. This contradiction calls into question the prevailing art pedagogy.
4. This kind of work fosters a relationship between artists, political leaders, and state institutions, creating space for the exploration of new forms. Such exploration helps to narrow the gap between life and art, theoretically.

Still, the satire is that the Constitution is not a work of popular or folk art, even though its text conveys the ideals of democracy for the people. Above four points alternatively arise four questions, too.

1. This new artistic relation is controlled by academy and state. Beyond academy and its aesthetics, there is no stakeholder invited for such a job. Are these folks and peasants real or idea and impression of middle class?
2. Is this collectivist approach limited to a certain class and aesthetics?
3. Patriarchal state and artists even not aware about their exclusive culture. So, in a way, did this art form normalize the patriarchal position of the new state?
4. Is this work established the old method of patronization?

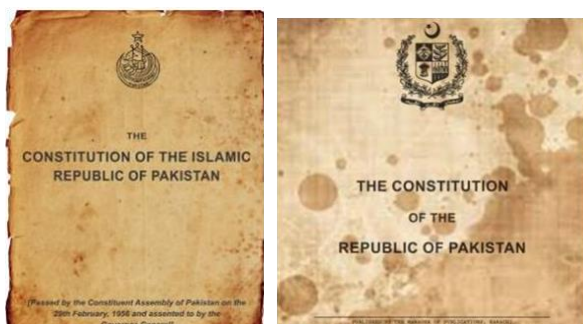
And finally this public art invites us to reconsider the idea and practice of democracy as well as public art in Bangladesh.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER CONSTITUTIONS

Dr. Kamal Hossain, the chairman of the Constitution drafting committee (Banglapedia 2023), said, “As we have collected constitutions from countries from different places, to write our constitution. Democracy, socialism, and secularism are the principles we have taken from different places”. Dr. Kamal Hossain was a scholar at the University of Oxford. “He was called to the Bar of England and Wales from Lincoln’s Inn (1959), and permitted to practice before the High Court in Pakistan (1959) and in Bangladesh (1971)...” (Website of Dr. Kamal Hossain & Associates). So, it was a very common thing that Kamal was well aware of European and as well as Commonwealth constitutions. Considering the focus of this article, the researcher needs to briefly allude to a few visual references from the early constitutions.

The world's oldest and most illustrious constitution was founded in Sweden in the 17th century, and the Norwegian Constitution was written in 1814 (Duttagupta, 26 January, 2020). The US Constitution was written in 1787 (National Archives of USA, 2024). All four pages of the Constitution of the United States are handwritten and on permanent display at the National Archives. Though the printing press was invented in the 15th century (History.com, 2018), and in the United States first printing press was set up in Cambridge in 1639 (Mystic Stamp Company, nd.).

The French Constitution was written in 1789 (Jellinek, nd.). The Norwegian Constitution was adopted in 1814 and is the second-oldest written Constitution in the World still in existence (Stortinget, 19 January, 2021). But all these constitutions are written as needed. There is no more artistic agenda to embellish these.



Images 37, 38: First two Constitutions of Pakistan: 1956, 1962. Source: National Assembly of Pakistan, Parliamentary History, Government of Pakistan.

The Indian Constitution was written in 1950 (Library of Congress, India). Pakistan has had three constitutions: in 1956, 1962, and 1973 (National Assembly of Pakistan), from which the first two (37, 38) were written before the liberation war of Bangladesh. But within all of these, the Indian one was the latest and very much pre-planned, which goes far beyond the documentary quality to gain the artistic feature (39, 40).



Images 39, 40: Two pages from the Indian constitution. Source: Legislative department. (2025, April 29). Constitution of India. Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India.

According to Dr. Kamal, as previously mentioned in this article, the committee followed the constitutions of Commonwealth countries, particularly the Indian Constitution.⁶

The original book is one of 1,000 photolithographic reproductions of the Constitution of the Republic of India, which came into effect on January 26, 1950, after being approved by the Constituent Assembly on November 26, 1949 (Rare Book Society of India, 26 January, 2013).

India completed their constitution from 1949 to 1950 (Patel and Roy Chowdhury, 11 October, 2023) as a Commonwealth country. India and Pakistan joined the Commonwealth in 1947 following their Independence Day. Bangladesh joined in 1972 (Institute of Commonwealth Studies). So, Bangladesh gets all of these constitutions of the Commonwealth countries as its study materials. Besides Dr. Kamal Hossain, Hashem Khan also mentioned the Indian constitution. The researcher also found that the Indian constitution is handwritten and decorated by artists. It makes sense for a new nation that gets priority for the people's best. These reveal the cultural phenomenon that was connected very keenly with the liberation war. After five decades, this initiative could be studied from multiple perspectives to dig up and understand the contextual history and timeless possibilities.

The Indian Constitution was handwritten. Without cover pages, the title page with the national emblem, and preamble, the constitution contains 231 pages (Signatures 222 to 231) with text, and alongside has a page with a list of illustrations. Cover page decorated with the national emblem and the padma (lotus) flower. Each page contains the artist's signature, and the calligrapher also signs each page. A total of 55 types of designs were used on the constitution to decorate the pages. Among those designs, only one design was repeatedly used for general pages (Library of Congress, India).

Tapati Guthakurta wrote-

Nandalal and his artists took on the role of manuscript painters in the past to illustrate the Constitution of India and created elaborately decorated page structures at the beginning of each chapter and illustrations of different eras in the titles. On the one hand, motifs taken from various ancient sculptures and architecture are chosen to highlight the national art history, such as the animal figure on the seal of the Indus civilization, the lion-adorned Ashoka pillar of the Maurya era, the architectural design of Buddhist stupas or temples in Odisha, or the details of Rajput and Mughal paintings. On the other hand, the national story progresses step by step from the scenes of Ramayana and Mahabharata or the spread of Buddhism to the history of British rule and nationalist movements;

from portraits of Tipu Sultan or Queen of Jhansi to portraits of Gandhi at the Sabarmati Ashram or Netaji at the Imphal-Kohima battle. The modern art of this new nation-state mixes the differences of legend and history to create a legend, on the pages of the Constitution (Guthakurta, 2016, pp. 30-31).

And “The calligraphy in the book was done by Prem Behari Narain Raizda. It was illuminated by Nandalal Bose and other artists, published by Dehradun, and photo-lithographed at the Survey of India Offices” (Rare Book Society of India, 26 January, 2013).

All artists' names are readable through the Constitution. Anyone can see those who are calligraphers and artists who decorated the pages. This advantage is created due to the design and type of work. And through the archiving system of a republic country, the state is allowed to access these people's property in a democratic way using digital facilities. They even mentioned the technique of preservation-

“Placed in a special helium-filled case in the Indian Parliament Library, the pages of the handcrafted Indian Constitution are bound in black leather, embossed with patterns in gold” (Rare Book Society of India, 26 January, 2013).

In comparison with the Indian constitution, Zainul denied the empire-centric history of the civilization, like his own art practice. Borhan Uddin Khan Jahangir critically discussed how Zainul Abedin distinguished himself from the prevailing art practices in Kolkata. He wrote that Abanindranath's means of discovering folklife are storytelling, myths, and fables. Nandalal's means of discovering folk life is mythology and directness without social background. Jamini Roy comes to rural life from pots, from dolls, from the tradition of folk paintings. Zainul Abedin has denied all these and has mastered a kind of realism, painted in the European style, and rejected the ideology of the Calcutta Art School (Jahangir, 1990, p. 11). Islam was at the heart of the ideology of the Pakistani state, while East Bengal had a colonial role. Zainul Abedin and his friends sought to escape this pressure by depicting the subjects of public life in their paintings, and they called the realistic depiction of public life, painted in the European style, folkloric (Jahangir, 1990, p. 12). The decoration of the constitution is a reminder of the painting movement that Zainul initiated by making realism and folk tradition synonymous.

On the contrary, Nandalal, as a pupil of Abanindranath, illustrates the history from Sindh to the present to invade the space confidently. Lines are bold, dominating, and show the stability used in the Indian Constitution. Drawings occupied the space without hesitation. On the other hand, the sketches and lines of the decoration of Bangladesh's constitution give a feeling of airy, transient, and hesitant. The line itself is not hesitant, but the space composition gives a sense of that. Zainul's drawing makes sense of the moment and transient life. On the other hand, the Indian Constitution reflects a significant historical period, shaped by subject matter and a lengthy, stable drafting process. As if the desire for immortal life is transformed into a mortal, transient life in the constitution of Bangladesh. Why did it happen? There is a long debate about the history and origin concerns for Pakistan and as well as Bangladesh, which was activated during the politics of partition (Kalra, 27 January, 2020). And at the same time, there is a politics of geography which is connected with the centre and marginal people's socio-economic culture.

Though Indian artists leave those pages with unified decorations and signatures, Zainul makes a signature to put the Nakshi Kantha motif on the pustani, which is put just after the cover, to create a signature constitution following the cultural phenomenon and the oath of independence. And on the next blank page after the pustani, artists just leave a spontaneous line to draw a shapla motif, as if it is to remove the stigma of the blank page. These tendencies show the enthusiasm of the folk to enjoy art in all ways, which is not found in the same language in the Indian constitution. Decoration of the Indian constitution, though, is found to be a great enthusiasm, but is very much planned and grandiloquent. The most important thing is that art is not only used there to ornament, but it also helps to portray the brief history of India through visual language. Just because there is a space doesn't mean that there needs to be any work. Rather, artists divided the spaces of each page to keep their planned image and the text. Text and image are equally important in the Indian Constitution.

The images of the Indian Constitution followed historical events. On the other hand, Zainul represents the peasant life of the village-led Bangladesh. Though, in the constitution of Bangladesh, all participants are male artists,

even in the subject matter, whereas women artists actively participated in the Indian constitution. Each artist signs in their own language; this attitude very significantly expresses the ethnic diversification, too.

It should also be mentioned very briefly that the Indian Constitution's designs are very similar to the medieval manuscripts, even after considering the uniqueness of the embellishment (41, 42).



Images 41, 42: *De re aedificatoria* (On the Art of Building) is a classic architectural treatise written by Leon Battista Alberti between 1443 and 1452. (*De re aedificatoria*, title page of the 1541 edition) & Title page of 1553 edition, Florence. Source: Alberti, L. B. (1541). *De re aedificatoria* [Title page, digital image]. Fondazione Biblioteca Europea di Informazione e Cultura (BEIC). https://preserver.beic.it/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE6917118, and Alberti, L. B. (1553). *L'architecture et art de bien bastir du Seigneur Léon Baptiste Albert, gentilhomme Florentin, divisée en dix livres* [Woodcut illustration]. National Gallery of Art. <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.62330.html>

To compare the details with the Indian Constitution, it can be said that Zainul uniquely decorated the pustani with Nakshi Kantha motifs. To represent the entire context (economic condition to limited timeframe), Zainul used folk motifs to decorate the Constitution, creating an original manuscript. At the same time, Bangladeshi artists follow the Indian constitution as a shadow model to create their own. Peasant life was Zainul's natural selection from his student life, and transient folk motifs were his conscious understanding.

CONCLUSION

Firstly, the constitution drafting committee was concerned and had a curious mind to create new things for a new nation. They not only write the text but also determine and select the method of publishing the foundational document for a new state. Secondly, they also entrusted Zainul Abedin with this work, like Nandalal Bose for the Indian Constitution, who was also a living legend in his own time. Thirdly, Zainul not only took this responsibility during his illness, but also planned and decorated the constitution to gain a futuristic plan that is connected with the people's economy, like an art and craft village. Zainul's dream, Zainul's nature, and the commitment to the liberation war are interconnected. So, the proposal from the leader of the liberation war, crowned as Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin, makes a perfect combination, with the essence of the constitution. The new state meets the new art, which Zainul introduced in Bangladesh.

At the same time, this art piece is not entirely unique in the consideration of the Indian constitution, which they followed from the very early phase to the printing press for their working process. But the Indian constitution's decoration is heavy and permanent, like their national emblem and the middle-aged manuscript. And the decoration of the Bangladesh constitution is light like a floating shapla, which is the national emblem, too.

After studying the Bangladesh and Indian constitutions, it seems that where Nandalal has been driven by the Ashoka pillar, Shapla led Zainul to decide the next steps.

END NOTES

1. All three artists are freedom fighters. It should be noted that in 1971, artist Junabul Islam was suddenly arrested by the Pakistan army. His crime was that he was a relative of Colonel Abu Taher and that Taher's

wife and children had taken shelter in Junabul Islam's house for a long time. Though Syed Azizul mentioned only that- "During the liberation war, Zahurul Haque and Junabul Islam, two brothers of Zainul Abedin, were arrested by Pakistani forces. At this point, Zahurul Haque was released without any effort. But to release Junabul Islam, there was a lot of suffering. Islam was liberated with the help of the artist Khawaja Shafiq Ahmed, son of the Nawab family of Dhaka" (Huq, 2015, p.157). ...Syed Abul Barq Alvi was arrested from the house of musician Altaf Mahmud as a freedom fighter of sector number 2. Then he is tortured so cruelly that he thinks death is better than that. All the nails of his hands were pulled out...(Khan, 8 October, 2022).

2. Interview by Author. Voice record. And A.K.M. Abdur Rauf and some others formed a steering committee to organize Bengalis in London for the liberation war of Bangladesh. (18) According to the decision of this committee, the responsibility of publishing a semi-weekly newspaper with all leaflets, magazines, and poster designs fell on Abdur Rauf. He started publishing a magazine called "Bangladesh Sangbad Parikrama" entirely by hand (20) (Nahar, 2011, p. 20).
3. "Then it was said that we will see 2 formats, i.e., 8 pages as samples from BG Press first. Only then will the final decision be taken after verification. Bangabandhu now said slowly, 'Abedin brother, so be it.' BG Press shows us 8 pages. You will have the final say" (Khan, 8 October, 2022).
4. It was also the first state-patronized commercial work for Bangladesh, no matter how small the amount was. Artists have done this work to build and be part of a new history. Artists were also chosen by Zainul. So, it was a great chance to be engaged with this opportunity for the artists rather than consider it as a commercial work. Artist pride expressed in such a way-

"I was very inspired and encouraged to think that we four freedom fighter artists would work together under the leadership of Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin. It seems to me that after gaining independence in the "liberation war", we artists have joined the work of nation building in another liberation war" (Khan, 8 October, 2022).

Nevertheless, the new state set a pioneering example to patronize art. Abul Barq Alvi was the youngest member of this group. Now he cannot recall properly about the honorarium. He thinks that as a junior, it was impossible to know about this. Samarjit said they received a very small honorarium. The new state was not capable of doing more than that. And Hashem Khan also stated the same thing. He added that they also denied accepting any honorarium. Another important thing is that Zainul did not receive any honorarium for this issue.

5. Zainul Abedin: Sristishil Jibonsomogro, this biographical book will help to understand this statement (Huq, 2015).
6. Though the leader of the commonwealth concept, the pride holder of Britishness, England has no written constitution (University College London, nd.). As they have no folk museum or folklore department, although they promote the folklore concept in the former colonized world through their colonial power. Recently, they have tried to do something about this (Museum of Youth Culture, nd.)

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