

# The Song of the Sea

Recollecting the cultural revolution of Bangladesh

ANANTA YUSUF

ONE day, during the gruesome Calcutta riot (1946), a curious boy escaped the strict surveillance of his *phupu* (paternal aunt), Salema Khatun. He went to Gorer Math, wandering alone on the streets. He witnessed strange happenings in a grocery shop—people of all ages were running off with different things. Despite not understanding what was happening, the kid joined them, picked up a bottle of soft drink and returned home. His *phupu* punished him severely. "This is called 'loot'," she cried—a lesson he would remember long after.

On the same day, he became familiar with the world and the reality of riots and murders. The brutal incident moved the young boy within. In a way, it changed his perception of the world forever. Several years later, the young, mischievous boy grew up to be one of the key figures of the cultural arena of Bangladesh—the iconic activist, Kamal Lohani.

While sharing his experience on the riot, Lohani says, "I learned so many things on that day. My *phupu* was a sensible school teacher and she opened my eyes."

Lohani was always a rebellious child. He first went to jail in 1953, when he and his comrades of the Bangladesh Student's Union, protested against the Muslim League Council and the visit of East Pakistan's Chief Minister Nurul Amin in Pabna. At that time, he was a student of the Government Edward College.

During the protest, he stood on a table and gave his first speech, "I was not at all prepared, but somehow managed to deliver the speech," Lohani says with a broad smile.

He and his comrades succeeded in impeding the Muslim League Council and in return, the government jailed

him for seven days. At this point in history, a legendary figure was born.

Today the octogenarian does not get much time to take a break. Even at this age, he is always busy with different cultural activities. Young people—in his words, "my young friends"—occupy his drawing room to enthusiastically learn about the history of Bangladesh—gems that one will never find in a textbook.

Back in the 50s, at Edward College, Kamal Lohani discovered his two loves—Karl Marx and his wife-to-be, Syeda Dipti Rani. Political campaigning and movement bound the two young hearts and they lived as one soul till she breathed her last in 2007.

In 1958, when the martial law was declared, Lohani was arrested with many other student activists. It was the



PHOTO: SHANKOR SAJJAL

*He worked for almost every reputed newspaper in the country, went against the government's decision and celebrated the Rabindra Centennial in 1961, joined as a secretary at Chhayanaut in 1962, formed a left cultural frontier—Krantī in 1967 and played a leading role in almost all the cultural and political programmes arranged in the 60s.*

beginning of a new phase in his life at the Rajshahi Central Jail. He was in the same place where the infamous Khapra Ward killing took place (on April 24, 1950, firing by the police took lives of seven communist revolutionaries in Khapra Ward, Rajshahi Central Jail). Prison life had a profound effect on his political outlook in his later life.

In prison, senior communist politicians gave him a regular duty. "Every day I translated news from two English dailies—*The Statesman* of Calcutta and the *Pakistan Observer*," he says. "This is how news was imprinted in my very soul. You can say I learnt journalism in prison." This experience helped him to get his first job in the daily *Millat* in 1955.

His family was against his political involvement and requested him to complete his education. Upon his return home, after nearly one and a half years of imprisonment, Lohani's family members tried hard to persuade him to continue with his studies. But he had made up his mind, "I took my

intermediate (HSC) exams from prison. But failed," he says. "I believed that I had to be involved in politics. Marxism was running through my blood like fire," he explains about his tenacious decision to continue with politics.

Within a few days, Lohani left his home and came to Dhaka alone. He worked for almost every reputed newspaper in the country, went against the government's decision and celebrated the Rabindra Centennial in 1961, joined as a secretary at Chhayanaut in 1962, formed a left cultural frontier—Krantī in 1967 and played a leading role in almost all the cultural and political programmes arranged in the 60s.

In 1960, he got married to his political comrade, cousin and love Dipti Rani. Eventually, he became father to two daughters and a son.

In one of Dipti Lohani's writings, "Amar Chokhe Kamal Lohani", she proudly states that her husband never bowed his head before any unethical means; he always held his head high

with pride and dignity. "A sea of people was joining Bakshal," she writes. "He was a man that moved against the popular current." Kamal Lohani loved Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman but didn't believe in Bangabandhu's one party political theory.

During the war, he worked as the news editor of Shwadhin Bangla Betarkendra. "I was in charge of the news desk, but my work was not confined to collecting and reading news," he says. They had to run any work that was required at that moment. "Our workstation at Baliganj Circular Road was not fancy. Rather, it was a small stuffy room. The recording studio was not soundproof, which is why many of the recordings had a lot of noise from the outside."

For him, each and every day working with the Shwadhin Bangla Betar Kendra was historically significant. From the early hours of December 16, 1971, those working for the radio started to sense impending victory. "We had received orders to play victory songs and circulate triumphant slogans," says Lohani. "I am fortunate that I was entitled with the responsibility of writing and reading the news bulletin on our victory."

The "1 Minute News Bulletin" had only two sentences in it, he remembers. The first sentence began with cursing the Pakistani armed forces, moving on to "we won the battle". The statement following was about the Pakistani army surrendering their arms and weapons.

The government paid its respect to Kamal Lohani when he was awarded the Ekushey Padak in 2015. On his 81st birthday, it's now our turn to show our gratitude to the man whose words and activism inspired millions to survive and emerge victorious against the genocide of 1971.

The article was first published by *The Daily Star* on June 19, 2015.

## THE WORLD AFTER COVID-19

# Can independent cinema survive this crisis?

This week, in *The Daily Star's* interview series that aims to give readers an idea of what changes to expect in a post-Covid-19 world, filmmaker Amitabh Reza Chowdhury talks to Minam Haque about the future of independent cinema. With a portfolio of national and international critical acclaim, Reza is an established name in the media, with several notable TV plays to his credit. Known in the industry for portraying unique creative prowess through his lens, the storyteller made his directorial debut with 'Aynabaji', one of the most successful films of 2016. The film also got a screening at the 69th edition of Cannes Film Festival.

The pandemic has suspended many activities and the arts seem to have come to a standstill. As a filmmaker how has this experience affected you professionally? Have you found alternative ways to continue with work while in self-isolation? How are you dealing with the process?

This pandemic is a challenge unlike any we have ever faced before. The bigger names in the industry have the ability to deal with the financial constraints easily, and so can the smaller ones, those that operate on a minimal scale. My production house is a middle-income business, thus we are comparatively more vulnerable. I work with a team consisting of a good number of professionals, meaning they must be paid professionally as well.

In my line of work, we are no strangers to self-isolation as we often need to concentrate thoroughly on parts of our work like scriptwriting and in order to do so, we have to move away from all the hustle and bustle. So, in a way isolation is a good thing, allowing us uninterrupted time for our work. Also, I try to keep myself away from all the negative news related to the pandemic. I just follow a few selective sources, but try to keep my

mind free from most of it. Instead, it is better to connect with friends and family during such times and nurture a positive state of mind.

My current strategy is to work in a manner suitable to the existing circumstances within the given limitations, so that we can resume operations with a smaller team. However, revenue remains one of the biggest challenges, and a strategic way to tackle it, is to establish our video on demand (VOD) platforms. If that can be achieved, then the prospects will be promising.

Will independent cinema survive in a post-Covid world where there is likely to be a crisis in funding for films?

There is a high possibility that there will be a crisis in funding for films in a post-Covid world, but that does not necessarily mean that independent cinema won't survive. There is no need to spend extravagantly on making films to portray scenes that surpass the budget. Instead, focusing on the originality of the content can attract today's audience who, I believe, are more realistic. We saw such an approach being successful during the Italian neorealism where emphasis was



Amitabh Reza Chowdhury

PHOTO: SHAHREAR KABIR HEEMEL

placed on the value of ordinary people. Independent cinema will surely triumph if over-the-top platforms (streaming services) can also make use of such an approach.

Technology has played an incredible role during this crisis. What kind

of changes and innovations do you foresee in the technology used in filmmaking? Can Bangladeshi independent cinema catch up?

I don't think this is an issue. Cinematic technology only becomes a necessity when we are talking big budget films. As far as I'm concerned, whatever technology we have at the moment will suffice.

Many have resorted to online and social media communities amidst the lockdown to engage with their audience. Have you done anything similar? If so, what?

We have worked on a web series for "Aynabaji" during the early days of the lockdown, but that was about it. Since we did not have any existing well-established platforms, we were not prepared for such a thing. However, we are making some preparations now and are currently in the preproduction stage.

What new adjustments will have to be made during the shooting?

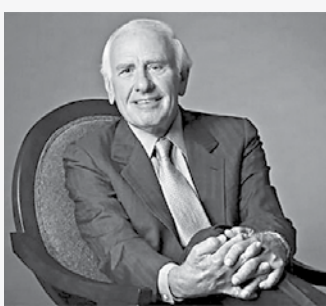
The pandemic has made it an obligation to create a new working protocol, therefore, we have adopted the guidelines ascribed by the government and health authorities

and plan to implement them to our daily operation on the sets. Workplaces should have Covid-19 risk assessments and plans in place. We will strictly maintain the screening protocols, social distancing norms, sanitising, proper hygienic measures, and wearing of masks and gloves. We also encourage a work-from-home strategy when and where possible. Leave of absence is mandatory if anyone shows any symptoms of illness. If we adhere to all the details in the protocol set forth, it will enable us to minimise exposure and thereby limit the spread of Covid-19 while helping us to sustain a functional film industry.

Having made successful rounds across international film circuits, how is the scenario now? As travelling restrictions are easing steadily, are there any film festivals in your itinerary?

The work that I do is never intended for any film festivals. I just want to tell my stories, and I believe if they are powerful enough, they will resonate with the audience. And that in turn can propel them far and wide. As of now, I don't have any plans on travelling, but overtime as flights begin to operate on a larger scale, things may change.

### QUOTABLE Quote



JIM ROHN (1930-2009)

American entrepreneur, author and motivational speaker.

*Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishment.*

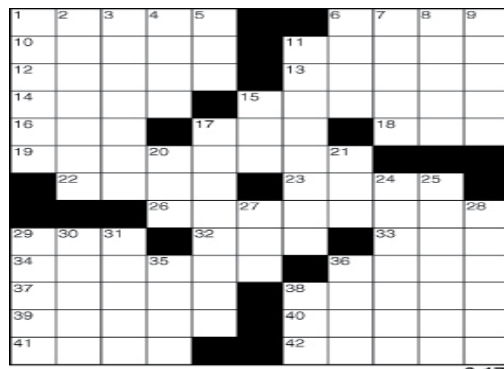
### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

#### ACROSS

- 1 Was furious
- 6 Russian ruler
- 10 Love, to Luigi
- 11 City on the Nile
- 12 Movie based toy
- 13 Urge forward
- 14 Different
- 15 Skiing variety
- 16 Flock father
- 17 In the style of
- 18 Prof's helpers: Abbr.
- 19 Glossy bird
- 22 Writer Ferber
- 23 Shipbuilding wood
- 26 Becoming tangled
- 29 Bowler, e.g.
- 32 In the past

#### DOWN

- 1 Insurance workers
- 2 "Did you start without me?"
- 3 Loses it
- 4 Lake near Buffalo
- 5 Bear's lair
- 6 Bivouac
- 7 "Be quiet!"
- 8 Sports spot
- 9 Parts
- 11 Leaves in the kitchen
- 15 Boxing great
- 16 "M\*A\*S\*H" star
- 20 Hosp. workers
- 21 Salon stuff
- 24 Radio carrier
- 25 Worked dough
- 27 Historic time
- 28 Dead ducks
- 29 Yard border
- 30 Decorate
- 31 Used a stopwatch
- 35 Plays the ponies
- 36 Oxford, e.g.
- 38 Camera type



### YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



### BETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



### BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.