

Colours of Freedom

The 'Potua' and his paintbrush against brutality

SADYA AFREEN MALICK

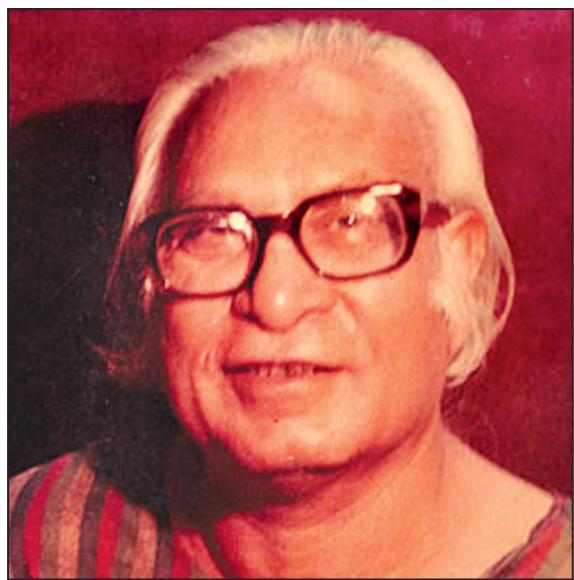
As the mercury steadily dropped, the chill in the air felt starkly different from the fiery situation prevailing everywhere across the country. This was early February, the year 1971. The mass upsurge of 1969 followed by non co-operation movement in 1971 against the Pakistani regime had pushed the country to a point of no return.

Shumona faintly recalls her days with her father, acclaimed artist Quamrul Hassan, at their Central Road residence. Quamrul was then the chief designer of the erstwhile East Pakistan Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (EPSCIC) now Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC). But his daytime work was quite different to what occupied his time at dead of night. For then, his home would become the gathering place for scores of artists from the Arts College, who had a similar dream of an independent Bangladesh. The group would tirelessly work under the maestro's guidance, designing and creating huge anti-regime posters. Little Shumona Hassan enjoyed watching the young artists make buckets full of glue and using poster colours from big jars. Before sunrise the students would fan out, boldly setting up the anti-oppression posters all across the capital.

February 21st was approaching. In that current fervour of nationalism, political, social and cultural activists had united under a single banner. Quamrul Hassan and his group of artists decided to try and reflect that sense of patriotism in the most visible manner they could. Working non-stop over the next days, they used their brushes to completely transform the road leading to the Central Shaheed Minar, turning it from a blackened pathway to one painted with bright and traditional *Alpanas*. The crimson was a vivid reminder of the blood that the country had pledged to keep the dream of independence alive.

A huge tree beside the Shaheed Minar was chosen as a symbolic landmark. It was decorated with Bangla alphabets and named the *Okhhar Brikhho* (Alphabet tree) to reflect the vitality of the Bengali language.

This was Quamrul Hassan. Active, energetic and ever innovative, he would spend hours doodling in his sketchbook, the cigarette packet or whatever served as a drawing board. Even while serving in-exile as the Director of The Art Division of the Information and Radio Dept of Bangladesh, he



Quamrul Hassan and posters designed by him during the war

drew the ferocious caricature of Yahya Khan, titled *Annihilate These Demons*, that later almost reached iconic status.

Besides his mastery in the art world, Quamrul Hassan was also extremely adept in performing arts. He used to frequent Vastukalabid, at Paribagh, the gathering place of stalwarts from the political, cultural and intelligentsia. On a bright sunny afternoon, students of all ages gathered at the lush green gardens. There was excitement and a whisper in the air as we were expecting to get *Brotochari Nritya* (dance lessons) from Quamrul Hassan.

Brotochari Nritya was not a typical dance form depicting joy, sorrow, or festive moods but rather a dance that carried a message to the society. During the British rule of India, young Quamrul, enlightened by the ideas of Guru Sodoy Dutta initiated the *Brotochary Andolon*. He gathered a group of progressive young men and the seeds of nationalism were sown. It was amazing how social and cultural movements gained immense popularity in the simplistic art form and songs. The country watched as this movement gained momentum and inspired social awareness amongst people of all walks of life.

While we were all in a trance, 'Qamrul chacha' as we called him, put a *gamcha* on his waist, tied a headband, slung a *madol* around his neck and took centre stage! We began to dance to the tune of *Manush hao, Abaar tora Manush hao*, (Come back to the folds of humanity), *Shobey chol aye kheli bir nritter keli...* (let's dance to the tune of heroism), or *Chol kodaal chalai khabo khirer malai*, (let us work hard, play hard). We felt our heart racing to the beat of the *madol*.

In December, the most symbolic and historic month glorifying our Independence, it seems an opportune time to reflect Quamrul Hassan's contribution to the spirit of freedom.

It's an opportune time to realise how it's not always violence that prevails, but rather the deep-rooted spirit of Independence that pulls the country through the darkest times.

It's an opportune time to wish that his crimson brushstrokes on the Shaheed Minar had not merely painted the pathway, but had tinted the spirits of millions to keep the spirit of Independence alive.



A tale of two sisters

Minu Haque and Shimul Yousuff reminisce '71

KARIM WAHEED

End of August 1971: Minu and Shimul are two upcoming artistes. Minu, 17, is an enlisted dancer of TV and Shimul, 14 is enlisted in radio. They come from a culturally oriented family. Their devout parents -- Mehetar Billah and Amina Billah -- have always encouraged them to pursue singing, dancing, namely any form of art. Minu and Shimul are two of eight siblings. Their elder sister is married to noted cultural activist and musician Altaf Mahmud. Though the war has pretty much broken out, the family is still intact at their home in Rajarbagh, close to the Police Line. But all that was about to change in the next few days.

The Pakistan army made a list of radio and TV performers and was looking for them. For obvious reasons Amina Billah was concerned for the safety of their daughters, specifically Minu. When Minu came to know about the field hospital in Bislamganj, near Agartala (India) from Sultana Kamal (daughter of poet Sufia Kamal) and Dr Dalia Salahuddin, she was eager to go there and work as a trainee nurse.

On August 26, Minu left home in a white Toyota Corolla, driven by Masud Sadeq. She was soon joined by others and they were dropped off near Demra. They women were clad in *burqa* and when they had to cross check posts, they said they were going to attend a wedding in Comilla. There were about 15/20 of them in the group, led by Habibul Alam (Bir Pratik) and Shahadat Chowdhury (former editor of *Bichitra* and 2000). There were trained doctors and individuals from other professional backgrounds in the group as well. Sometimes on boat, often on foot, the group headed towards the border area, near Comilla.

They reached CNB Road in Comilla. As they were wondering how to move forward unnoticed, the group was helped by some individuals who did not look like Freedom Fighters. As Minu vividly remembers, "They resembled *razakars*, yet they hid us in boats between loads of hilsa fish and bales of jute. I'd assume they were informers, posing as

razakars, working for the Freedom Fighters. After the boat ride we had to wade for a couple of miles. Eventually, after what seemed like a lifetime, we reached Bislamganj."

Meanwhile, Shimul and the rest of the family were going through a different kind of ordeal. In the morning of August 30, Shimul was doing *reyaz* and her mother was reading the Quran. Shimul noticed an army truck park near their home, causing all kinds of commotion. Her brother-in-law, Altaf Mahmud was sleeping in his room and before she could go

mercilessly with gun butts; he was being asked to confess that he had ammunition hidden somewhere in the house. Altaf was composing inspirational songs for the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. He was also a member of 'Crack Platoon', one of the urban guerrilla groups. Abdu Samad, a former acquaintance of Altaf, had informed the military of his links with the Crack Platoon.

As the military men threatened him that none of the family members would be spared if he did not cooperate, Altaf had no other way

were taken away; Altaf separately in another car. As Altaf was being pushed to the car, he looked at Shimul for a few seconds. "I still remember that look. That was the last time I saw him. After they were gone, I felt I'd grown up overnight," says Shimul.

"I didn't know Urdu, regardless of how I felt, I was still 14. I tried my best to find out the whereabouts of my brothers and Altaf bhai. I was told they were all killed. I didn't have the nerve to share that piece of information with my mother. Fortunately, after some time, my brothers were released. I have no idea how my brother Linu was tortured but when we tried to change his clothes, parts of his skin came off."

"Almost everyday my mother went to Cantonment, looking for Altaf bhai. We heard stories of how around 32 people whom the army arrested were kept cramped in two small bathrooms. We also heard about the ingenious techniques of torture: Abul Barq Alvi's nails were pulled off with pliers.

"We never found Altaf bhai. Till her last day, my mother believed he would come back. I think he was burnt alive by the army, as they had done with several others who couldn't walk any more, due to numerous broken bones."

After serving in the Bislamganj field hospital, Minu went to Calcutta (now Kolkata) in November. On January 1 1972, Minu left Shialdah Station for Dhaka. The journey took three days. She went to their Rajarbagh home, only to find out her family did not live there any more. The landlady was kind enough to take her to the family's new home in Maghbazar. When she went there, the new house help who had never seen Minu, would not let her in. Her mother had gone to Comilla to look for Altaf Mahmud.

Minu, now a noted dancer and Shimul, a leading theatre personality, did not celebrate Victory Day. They believe like them, the families that had lost their dear ones could not get into the festive mood.



Minu Haque (L) and Shimul Yousuff

PHOTO: STAR

and alert him, the army men broke in through the back door. Shortly after, Abul Barq Alvi (currently a professor of Institute of Fine Arts), Shimul's brothers, and some neighbours were rounded up.

Shimul saw Altaf Mahmud being beaten

but to show them where the ammo was buried. He was made to dig it up by himself; the ruthless beating did not stop however. Shimul still remembers her brother-in-law's bleeding forehead; he was struggling to carry the heavy trunks. All the men in Shimul's family

Kalyani Ghosh and her glory days

AHSAN HABIB

Kalyani Ghosh is an artiste with significant contribution to the War of Independence in 1971. She worked with Bangladesh Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Shangstha, Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, Bangladesh Torun Shilpi Gosthi and Calcutta Youth Choir. Her songs inspired and mobilised the people to fight against the enemy. In her words, "As a singer I believed I could best serve the country through my songs."

After reaching Kolkata on April 21, Kalyani along with her brother Probal Chowdhury and sister Uma Khan joined Bangladesh Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Shangstha lead by Dr. Sanjida Khatun. Here she worked with Zahir Raihan, Alamgir Kabir, Deepen Bondyopadhyay, Wahidul Haque and others. "Those songs would stir my whole existence

whenever I sang them and they still do," she asserts.

In Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, Kalyani dedicated herself to patriotic songs and gono sangeet (songs of the masses). "The songs were composed by Samar Das, Ajit Roy, Sujeyo Shyam, Pronodit Borua. *Purbo digonte shurjo uttechhe, Nongor tolo tolo, Tumar neta amar neta Sheikh Mujib, Aha dhonyo amar jonmobhumir punyo sholie*, and other inspirational songs were sung by Kalyani, Abdul Jabbar, Rothindranath Roy, Kaderi Kibria, Mala Khan, Apel Mahmud, Rupa Farhad, Mrinal Bhattacharjya, Sujit Roy, Nasrin Ahmed Shilu and others. "Here artistes would get little time for rehearsals, in some cases songs were composed, rehearsed and recorded on the same day," Kalyani recollects.

Apart from her involvement in Swadhin



Kalyani Ghosh

PHOTO: STAR

Bangla Betar Kendra Kalyani worked with Bangladesh Torun Shilpi Gosthi. She was the general secretary of the organisation. She along with the troupe travelled to many refugee camps and remote areas in India and performed. In her views, "We worked to raise funds and to build popular support for the war. Funds collected from our performances were used to support the artistes and the Freedom Fighters."

Kalyani also performed in Delhi and other parts of India with Ruma Guho Thakurita and Calcutta Youth Choir.

"I do feel dejected sometimes when I see most of the artistes who fought for the independence not getting due recognition," she says.

"I am proud to have witnessed the most glorious days of the Bengalis and be a part of the struggle," she concludes.

Aly Zaker

A war correspondent

ERSHAD KAMOL

Renowned theatre actor-director and a familiar face on TV, Aly Zaker, had made significant contributions to our Liberation War. In the War he served not as a cultural activist, but as a war correspondent of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, the radio station that worked as the mouthpiece of the freedom struggle of Bangladesh in 1971.

Going back to those days, Zaker said, "In my student life, I was an activist of East Pakistan Students' Union and was involved with movements against the Ayub Khan regime. To me the independence of Bangladesh was urgent as I thought it is very important to defend our cultural identity. That's why I strongly believed that the country would be liberated sooner or later. I couldn't live in a colonised country."

After completing his studies Zaker took on a lucrative job. Neither was he purely a cultural activist nor a political figure. He was involved with the organisational works of Chhayanaat. However, the resistance of the Bengalis from every sector of society against the 'crack down' on March 25 night by the Pakistan Army inspired him to give up his job, and he actively participated in the war.

"On March 25 night I lived opposite the Rajarbag Police line, where the Pakistani Army carried out a massacre. I also observed the resistance of Bengali policemen against the oppressors. This incident had a great impact on me and I decided to join in the war effort."

"Seeing the genocide at the hands of the Pakistani Army, my family and I left Dhaka at the end of March 1971," recalls Zaker. On April 12, Zaker crossed the border. "Going to India I first decided to be a Freedom Fighter. However I was not recruited because of my poor eyesight. On being rejected, I became frustrated.

Then I came across a wonderful opportunity. Out of the blue I met filmmaker Alamgir Kabir on a footpath in Calcutta (now Kolkata). He suggested that I should join Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra."

At the radio station Zaker served as a reporter-producer of an English news programme, which aired reports on the war. He was a correspondent and political commentator. In addition, he used to translate and read speeches by the then Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed and the then acting president Nazrul Islam. Alamgir Kabir was the programme co-ordinator. And the hour-long programme used to go on air daily at 8:30 pm.

Zaker said, "Our aim was to unveil the truth of the war to the outer world as well as to protest the cover ups by the Pakistani media. We used to read the excerpts of the comments published on the foreign journals on our Liberation War to let the world know about different interpretations of the war."

As a reporter carrying a simple recorder, Aly Zaker wandered around camps and bunkers of the Freedom Fighters at the Northeast and Southeast region of the country and returned to the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra to air it on the radio. Recalling this golden moment of his life, Zaker said, "That experience makes me proud. I consider myself fortunate that I could interview sector commanders, sub-sector commanders and even I covered news from the bunkers while firing was on."

"I read the last news announcing the victory on the eve of December 16, 1971," he said. To quote him, "When I heard the news that the Pakistani Army had surrendered, I could not control my emotion. That was a dramatic moment of my life. I fell on the ground and burst into tears."

Zaker believes that his activities during the Liberation War have shaped his personality as an individual.



I read the last news announcing the victory on the eve of December 16, 1971



COURTESY: MUKTIJODDHER RAKTIM SMRITI BY MA BARI

Rare photographs from 1971: (Left) A play staged to raise funds for the freedom movement, (L-R) Quamrul Hassan, Zahir Raihan and Alamgir Kabir at a programme