

# Singing to freedom

## Rafiqul Alam reminisces on Shadhin Bangla Betar days

ROBINA RASHID BHUIYAN

The 1971 Liberation War in Bangladesh is set apart from the historical trope of violence, where Bangladeshis did not just collectively battle for a free land, but fought to protect their traditions and cultural identity. In 1971, hundreds of Bangladeshi singers risked their lives to join Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, the radio broadcasting centre for Bangladeshi nationalist forces, and last year the artists were rightfully accorded recognition as Freedom Fighters. One of the many memorable voices broadcast in that year was that of Rafiqul Alam, whose fate might have been different if his path did not cross Golam Arif Tipu's.

"I did not travel to West Bengal to sing, I wanted to train and take up arms against the enemy," Rafiqul Alam said. "At the training camp I met Golam Arif Tipu, who is the Chief Prosecutor in the Bangladesh War Crimes Tribunal today, and he pointed out that my voice was a valuable weapon. He instructed me to travel to Kolkata where Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra's studios were just set up, and the rest, as they say, is history."

In the crowded space of a 12 by 12 square feet room, Rafiqul Alam shared one microphone with 20 artists or so, and recorded his first song. "We sang 'Rokto Diye Naam Likhechi', composed by Shujeyo Shyam and possibly written by Abul Kashem Sandwip. The recording appliances were

rudimentary and domestic, with an Uher reel-to-reel tape recorder that might have been procured from the German Embassy, and one microphone that stood on a table in the room."

The most significant song to come out of the humble studio was to be its last. On December 15, Rafiqul Alam joined a few other artistes once more to record "Bijoye Nishaan Urche Oi", the first song to air in independent Bangladesh.

These victories were laced with the constant fear for their war-torn homes and families. When Rafiqul Islam returned to Rajshahi, he found his house ravaged and his family missing: "The Pakistan army and Al Badr Razakars were targeting homes of Shadhin Bangla Betar artistes, and ours did not escape their destruction. I started from Kolkata sometime in December, and although there was a ship sent from the government to carry all of us home, I chose to travel by road. Once I reached Murshidabad, I crossed a char on foot and arrived home on a small boat. Rajshahi was a small, clean divisional town, but I arrived to see the remnants of war in the demolished homes. When I eventually found my family, we had lost everything, and started a new life from scratch."

"I feel myself change physically and mentally during the Victory month. Our triumph and happiness is tinged with sadness as we cannot escape the traumatising memories of what we had endured, and lost during the war."



# Liberation War and saga of singers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

"I was a young adult in 1971. I was not the bravest; I hadn't killed anything except mosquitoes. All I had was music in my heart and my voice. After the March 25 crackdown, I started looking for the location of Shadhin Bangla Betar so I could join it, but nobody knew exactly where it was. Some said it was in Ramgarh, some said it was in the Hill Tracts." Anup Bhattacharya was recounting his story of joining the Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, at an evening of powerful melodies and stories of struggle at the Daily Star Centre. The installment was titled "Ekattor-er Gaan" and featured artistes of Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra and Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Sangstha.

"I reached Kolkata in June and eventually found the station. I met Rafiqul Alam, Lata (Kaderi Kibria) and others; thus began our life at SBBK," Bhattacharya said. "I produced a few songs for SBBK. We went to Melaghar once; there was a camp of Freedom Fighters. They lived in such adverse conditions, and faced unthinkable challenges on the battlefield. Compared to them, we were far better off."

Jahangir Hayat Khan, Rupa Farhad and Mala Khurram, shared stories about their father, the late Abdul Jabbar Khan, who was the director of the first film made in the erstwhile East Pakistan ("Mukh O Mukhosh"). "It was said that the weather of East Pakistan was not

suitable for film making. My father challenged it, and made the film, based on the novel 'Dakat'. There were no film artistes, no studio, and no recording arrangement. Most of it was arranged in a makeshift manner. When the war broke out, my father took me to Kolkata in April and I joined SBBK; I played guitar

Bangla, rupali aanchol kothaye rakhbey bolo", evoked morbid images.

Kaderi Kibria opened with an anecdote: "During our travels, we were stopped by the Pakistani forces once; I was asked to say I work in films and sing. They asked me about Mohammad Ali, who was a famous Pakistani actor. But I had a neigh-



Rupa Farhad, Mala Khurram and Jahangir Hayat Khan (top), Kaderi Kibria (L) and Anup Bhattacharya.

STAR FILE PHOTO

for all the songs recorded there," said Jahangir Hayat Khan.

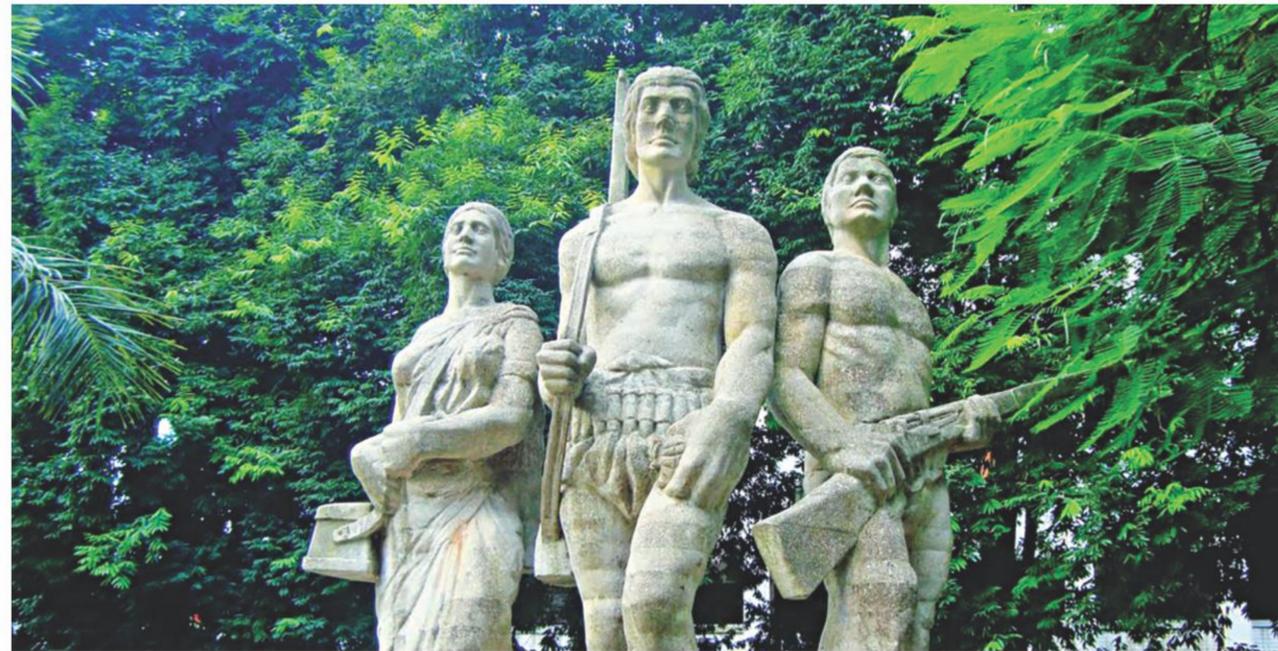
Rupa Farhad then shared the story behind a special song, "Chand, Tumi Phirey Jao", that was written and composed by Ajit Roy when the moon of the Eid-ul-Fitr was sighted in 1971, and played all day on Eid. The lyrics, "Dekho manusher khuney khuney roktim

bour who was also a musician by the same name. So I said Mohammad Ali was like a friend of mine. And then I sang Mehedi Hasan's ghazals. They let us go. I was captured once again in Kashinathpur where all the others captured were killed. I went to a camp, where a Freedom Fighter recognised me. He suggested that I go to SBBK, and took me to Kolkata."



# Modeling for the Aporajeyo Bangla

## Hasina Ahmed recalls creation of iconic sculpture



Hasina Ahmed with the model of her sculpture (L), and the Aporajeyo Bangla in all its glory.

FAHMIM FERDOUS

Among all the sculptures paying tribute to our glorious Liberation War, the Aporajeyo Bangla, standing tall in front of the Faculty of Arts of the Dhaka University, is arguably the most iconic. Eminent artist and sculptor, the late Syed Abdullah Khalid worked for six years to create it – a 12-foot tall sculpture of three youths representing people from all walks of life who stood shoulder to shoulder to defeat the occupationist Pakistan army in 1971 and give rise to an independent country on the world map.

Hasina Ahmed, the model for the

female figure in the sculpture, recently reminisced about the first days of the sculpture's development in a conversation with The Daily Star. Excerpts:

"Khalid, who is my cousin, wanted to do something for everyone to remember the struggle the entire nation's people had gone through to bring us Liberation, and that is where the idea for the sculpture came about. He asked me if I wanted to model for it, and I agreed."

"In the early part of the year in 1973, he booked me for three months, every day from 9am to 12 noon. I would go to his studio in Kalabagan, where he was making the initial clay models. The other two models, Benu and Fazle, would also come every

day at their designated time slots every day. I wore the same saree, the same hairstyle and everything, and stood still as he made the model. Like any artist, he was not easily satisfied with his work and put in a lot of hard work. He would tell me sometimes, 'I am still working on your fingers, they are not done perfectly yet.' A few months later, I left for Canada to settle there, but Khalid continued on with his work. I did not see it being made myself, but he sent me pictures. Much later, there was a documentary made on the sculpture, and when it was screened in Montreal I was invited there, and there I saw that he worked there tirelessly, rain or shine, to complete it."

"The first aid kit in my hand signifies

the contribution of women in the Liberation War. At the time, many women worked to nurse and treat injured Freedom Fighters at the camps, and it was symbolized this way. Of the other two models, one represents the urban youth, wearing trousers, and the other is wearing a lungi to symbolize the people of the rural parts, all of whom came together to fight for the country."

"I saw the sculpture for the first time when I visited Dhaka a few years later. I was so excited to see it because for me, it was like my contribution to the history of the War. During the war itself, we were just hiding and running around trying to stay alive. The army had burnt my father's house in Sylhet. We

were in Dhaka, living in constant fear and moving from one house to another. It was a very difficult time."

Hasina Ahmed, who has been living in Canada for 44 years now and works there at a journal publication for the dental industry, says the thought of the sculpture makes her nostalgic. "I never thought that I would leave this country and live abroad, but it happened. Memories of that time make me really nostalgic, and I just hope that all that this country's men and women fought for, it was worth it. The whole reason we fought and struggled is for Bangladesh to do well, and I hope it is doing well. I don't live here anymore, I am not a part of it -- I wish I was -- so all I can