

53 YEARS of unwavering comradeship

COVER STORY

They were part of the golden days of Film and Television. Hand-in-hand they have passed the golden jubilee of their marriage as well. Today with a cup of coffee, Hasan Imam and Laila Hasan is sharing the tale of their journey together in an interview with Rafi Hossain.

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Rafi: You two share a beautifully bosom bond together. Even after all these years. How did you two meet and get married?

Hasan Imam: Ours was an arranged marriage with some twists. We got married in 1965. I used to perform in Radio and Khelaghar.

Laila Hasan: I was very young then. I danced in Bulbul Academy and performed in Chitrangada, Shyama. I got a glance of him during Rabindra Shatabarsha; he was leaning against the wall and singing in a gentle croon. At that time, he already had set about performing in cinema and television. I watched three of his plays *Raktakarabi*, *TasherDesh*, *Raja Rani* where he had played the leading role. Mr. Kashim, Mr. Rafiq and Kafir Khan were his close associates in USIS. They were seriously looking for a bride for him. I, being unaware of the conspiracy that they harboured, continued performing in their multiple programmes.

Hasan Imam: I saw her for the first time in a show of *Voice of America*. Kafir Khan was our matchmaker. My mother then lived in India and my brother was in London. I talked to them about Laila. My mother came to Dhaka and went to her place on a pretext of finding home.

Laila Hasan: Within weeks *amma* and my mother-in-law became good friends.

Hasan Imam: There is a funny memory regarding our marriage. Back then I used to work in National Bank of Pakistan. All the government stipends within Dhaka were deposited in our bank. My father in law used to come to our bank every other month to take away his salary. He knew my face. In fact, he himself was a theatre artist of Dhaka University. He told me that he appreciated my performances and suggested me to venture into cinemas. Later on, when the alliance between our families was consolidated, my father in law suddenly demurred. He raised an objection that the candidate for his daughter was a cinema actor. Laila's grandfather Ali Ahmed Khan was the LLM of *Juktofront* at that time. He was acquainted with the affluence and cultural reputation of my family. He convinced my father-in-law to watch a film of mine and thankfully he could discern my dedication to acting.

Rafi: What was your impression when you found Hasan Imam as your life partner? Were you already in the limelight by that phase?

Laila Hasan: He was a good-looking hero with a flamboyant personality and dignified acting knack. He was, what you call a woman's dream-partner. By the time our marriage was being arranged, the media had taken great interest in it. Everyone was conversing and guessing about whom Hasan Imam was going to marry. I was then an already acclaimed name in the dance industry. I used to get an ample number of

proposals of working in cinema. My father was wishful about my debut at cinema industry, but my mother was not. She did not want me to embark upon that ostentatious world of cinemas, fame and limelight. I myself was not very interested either. My life and career revolved around dance. I acted with Khan Saheb Khalilur Rahman. As a child artist I accompanied Majhadul Islam Selim. I have directed and produced some films and dramas afterward.

Rafi: You have walked on a zigzag course of path in life. Tell us something about your multifaceted career and eventful life.

Hasan Imam: I was a sportsman at the outset. I used to play both cricket and football in West Bengal School teams. Chuni Goswami and I shared the same playground a couple of times. Then I had torn an anterior ligament in my knee



hence could not take my passion for sports ahead. But I still participated in some tournaments in Dhaka. Aly Zaker also used to play with me. I became member of a club named *Ferdous* by that time. I took first prize in *Rabindra Sangeet* category in *All India Festival* whereas such a brilliance of music as Chinmoy Chatterjee came second. I directed and produced a film named *Lalon Fakir* which later on brought me love, dignity and some awards as an added bonus. It was released right after independence in 1972. *Lalon Fakir* initially was a drama. Saidullah Asad and his wife got in touch with me that they wanted it to be a cinema. They calculated the required and estimated budget for it which was exorbitant. The surprising part was, they still held on to their decision of

producing the cinema. I gave the direction and Ujwal acted in it. I received prestigious awards for *Poriborton*, *Lal Sobujer Pala* and *Anyay Abichar* too. I am also probably versed in speech and oratory. Syed Ashraf once told me that he had stood for two hours amidst a crowd of Kishorganj, Mymensingh at late hour of night on my 80th birthday just to listen to my speech. In Sirajganj, once I came back to my seat after speaking for an hour. The audience had compelled me to stand before the microphone again and speak for one more hour.

Rafi: Tell us about your political journey and also your relentless association with *Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee*.

Hasan Imam: I do not identify myself as a political person. Also, I never did anything for my personal gain. My political journey began when I



was in class 3. I had refused to accept prize from a British magistrate, voicing my solidarity with the anti-British movement. When I lived in Burdwan, many political associates of my nana, among whom Bangabandhu was one often came to our place. Nana was the secretary of Muslim League. I was a 10 years old stripling then. Bangabandhu pampered me with his habitual affection and love. Khan Ata, Latif bhai, Dr. Raushan Ara, Mahbuba Hasan and I co-founded a cultural organization named *Muktodhara* which had emerged from an object of politicizing people in a redefined and cultured way. After independence, I went to meet Bangabandhu. He introduced me to Yusuf Ali who was the then Education and Cultural Affairs minister of Bangladesh. We two intended to

embed an institution that would inculcate the sense of interconnection between culture and revolution in people. Kamal Siddique and I had made the drafts of *Shilpakala Academy*. It was supposed to be an autonomous institute. Later on, during Ziaur Rahman's government it became a place of practicing music, dance and culture and the government took over its possession as well.

I gave up on all my achievements and ostentations in a moment, relying on my immediate decision of getting involved in *Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee*. I walked from here and there, across the country and persisted in that challenging campaigns. I have been subjected to attempted murder four-times. Terrorists have put the gun barrel on my mother's chest in my absence and threatened her that they would empty her lap. My wife and I had to leave our beloved motherland and live in some other corner of the planet for many years.

Laila Hasan: He once did a show on 7th November. Abundant threat calls resonated across our house that day.

Hasan Imam: In the time of Khaleda Zia's government, I had been privileged with armed security. One day I found some of those officers who happened to be my lifeguards reading *Inkilab*; a fanatical newspaper that was incessantly propagating rumours about me at that time. I requested the authority to take them back as I could sense the possibility of some ensuing danger. Probably something that had happened in Indira Gandhi's assassination. Later on, Awami League wanted to nominate me from their party. I notified them of my ideological standpoint. I would not be part of a politics that does not completely converge in my ideals.

Rafi: We are losing audience of Bangla Drama and cinema everyday. What do you two have to opine about it?

Hasan Imam: I am one of the co-founders of *Cinema and Natok Shilpo Samiti*. Our successors are ingenious. Every year at least three to four films bring about brilliance along with national and international awards. But our commercial cinemas are bereft of quality. We lack sufficient budget hence glamour and all other elements that audience looks about in a cinema. As far as our dramas and serials are concerned, I find them a thousand times better than the ones of India. But excessive advertisements irritate the audience.

Laila Hasan: We at least have a storyline and our camerawork is better than theirs. But the serials of West Bengal are telecast on a daily basis whereas we mostly have weekly serials. Serials are addictive. Getting to watch them everyday makes this addiction stronger and irresistible.

Hasan Imam: Actually we have a tradition of appreciating and somewhat exaggerating the

worth of Kolkata based culture and underestimating our indigenous art and artists. But I still remember what Sunil Ganguly said, "Dhaka will lead the next cultural revolution in Bengal. The people of East Bengal will retain the dignity of Bangla."

Rafi: The journey of you two is 53 years long. Tell us about some unique and distinctive characteristics of each other.

Laila Hasan: His integrity. He is out and out an exceptionally honest person. His dedication to his work is respectable. Be it acting or directing or anything else. He has been a responsible son, supportive husband and affectionate father throughout his entire life. His intrepidity and fearless movements have always made him unique even in a crowd. I can never forget his battle against the traitors, year after year, how he used to live a life of vagabond and face death threats every other day.

Hasan Imam: She has been the most supportive wife ever. She never restrained me from doing anything. In fact, when I left everything behind and started campaigning across the country, she encouraged my wish. When I had to flee from my country for the sake of my life, she strongly held my hand. She actually fostered our whole family.

Rafi: Do you have any plan of writing an autobiography?

Hasan Imam: Not really. I have met so many venerable personalities in life that I shudder to write my own biography. I have a vague feeling that I have not done anything so significant in life which I need to articulate and retain in document. I met people like Indira Gandhi, Jyoti Basu and Bangabandhu. Cultural revolutionists like Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, RD Barman. I worked with Satyajit Roy. How unbelievably majestic they were! I have been to USA and Russia as an invited guest of their prime ministers. Still these achievements seem so trivial and the world seems so big.

By Sharbani Datta

