



Amala Shankar (C) with Sharmila Banerjee (Bottom left) and her other students during her 98th birthday celebration.



Amala Shankar with Sharmila Banerjee and her other students at Uday Shankar India Culture Centre, during a rehearsal in 1972.

“She was a guiding light”

-Sharmila Banerjee on her guru, Amala Shankar

Renowned dancer Sharmila Banerjee developed a keen interest in the art form from an early age, inspired by her guru, legendary danseuse Amala Shankar. Amala recently passed away at her residence in Kolkata at 101, due to age-related complications. Taking a trip down memory lane, Sharmila Banerjee talks about her journey as a dancer, and the role Amala Shankar played in her life.

ASHLEY SHOPTORSHI SAMADDAR

Sharmila Banerjee first came across Amala Shankar when her family visited Kolkata in 1969. Her cousin Bhaswati Ghosh, a student of Uday Shankar India Culture Centre at the time, took her to the academy, where she discovered the magic of dance as a means of communication. “I first met *Mashima* (Amala Shankar) while she was dancing at the academy with instrumental music. It felt like a dream to see the tall and beautiful *opshora*. She was so graceful, and she could tell tales through her body,” shares Sharmila Banerjee, the founder of Nritya Nandan, an established dance institution in Bangladesh.

Sharmila Banerjee and her family left Bangladesh and moved to India, during the Liberation War in 1971. “I joined Uday Shankar India Culture Centrea as a student in India. That is when I bonded with *Mashima*,” she smiles. “Her powerful personality astounded me and after attending few of her classes, I decided that I wanted to be a dancer. The Liberation War of 1971 had two gifts in store for me —an independent nation and dance!”

Amala Shankar had a unique teaching technique that focused on creativity. “Alongside dance lessons, the main attraction of *Mashima*’s classes was exploring creativity and improvisation. She would ask us to represent nature, or numbers, alphabets and shapes with our body,” says Sharmila Banerjee. “Her techniques have stayed with me. Following her ways, I taught a class just recently, asking the students to emphasise on their elbows and make an ‘8.’”

Amala Shankar was always very welcoming to newcomers. “During the Annual Show of 1972, held at Rabindra Sadan, *Mashima* selected dancers from a group of first-year students, but no one dared to take the floor and dance before her. I don’t know what came over me then, but I spontaneously jumped and showed a few movements,” she says. “I was lauded for my work, and selected to

perform along with the seniors.”

Sharmila Banerjee further talked about the ideals and principles she learnt from Amala Shankar. “*Mashima* made no compromises in the execution of the dance,” she asserts. “If someone had any problems, she humbly advised them to step aside. She did so not to criticise anyone, but to protect the quality of the performance.” As dancers, everyone was equal before Amala Shankar, regardless of their fame or seniority. Their positions in

the choreographies were determined through their performance, not their status of seniority. “*Mashima* encouraged us to improve and to earn our place in the performance. She always prioritised the dance as a whole, and never seconded the concept of individualism,” explains Sharmila Banerjee. “On one hand, *Mashima* taught us the true joy that humbleness begets, and on the other hand, she taught us the importance of punctuality, commitment, practice and



Amala Shankar with Sharmila Banerjee and Bhaswar Banerjee during her visit to Chittagong in 1987.

PHOTOS: STAR & COURTESY



Sharmila Banerjee

orderliness.”

The dancer last visited her guru in Kolkata, when Amala Shankar turned 99. “She was surprised to see her students. We reminisced our days as teenagers at her dance academy,” shares an emotional Sharmila Banerjee. “She wanted to visit Bangladesh one more time. I am glad that my last memory of *Mashima* is that of a strong and beautiful, yet humble and sweet woman, who treated dance like a prayer.”

The demise of Amala Shankar is a grave loss for her students and admirers. Sharmila Banerjee reminisces her guru as a majestic artiste, who inspired young dancers to express their inner emotions through the body. “*Mashima* aided my trajectory as a dancer – she was a guiding light to me,” she adds.

Sharmila’s fellow friend from her early dance school days, Urmimala Sarkar Munsu, an associate professor in Jawaharlal Nehru University, is writing a book on Amala Shankar’s husband, legendary dancer and choreographer Uday Shankar. She has dedicated a section of the book to Amala Shankar’s brilliant methods and journey.

“*Mashima* changed my whole perception about dance. I embraced her ideals, morals and sense of discipline wholeheartedly. Though I was under her guidance and tutelage for a very short time, she holds a special place in my life. I hope to instill the values that I learnt from her in future generations of young dancers,” concludes Sharmila Banerjee.

Revisiting the legacy of Mohammad Barkatullah

SHAH ALAM SHAZU

Most 90’s children would fondly remember the character of Baker Bhai from *Kothao Keu Nei* (1992). The man who played an integral role in bringing this legendary character to our TV screens, Mohammad Barkatullah, is no more among us. The producer, who was undergoing treatment at Green Life Medical College and Hospital, breathed his last on August 3, 2020. He had tested positive for COVID-19 after his wife Zeenat tested positive for the virus and was admitted to the hospital due to high fever. He was in ventilation when he unfortunately suffered a stroke.

Known for masterpieces like *Shokal Shondha*, *Dhakay Thaki* and *Nokkhotrer Raat*, Mohammad Barkatullah also served as the General Manager of Bangladesh Television for a while, before his retirement.

Suborna Mustafa, who played Muna in *Kothao Keu Nei* – a role that marks a milestone in her career – recalls her memories with Mohammad Barkatullah. “Bidding goodbyes are always tough, especially when you have so memories worth cherishing,” mentions the actor. “I have learnt a lot from a creative genius like him. I have lot of fond memories with him, not only from the sets of *Kothao Keu Nei*, but also from every time that I met him otherwise.”

Freedom fighter, renowned actor and former Cultural Affairs Minister Asaduzzaman Noor also reminisced his days with Mohammad Barkatullah. “We have spent decades as peers, and thoroughly enjoyed every step of the way. This news is certainly hard for me to accept,” he shared. “He was very keen on achieving perfection and his work was always his utmost priority. His contribution to the Bangladeshi television industry is immense and unforgettable.”

Noted actor Azizul Hakim worked alongside him in multiple productions. “We worked together in *Nokkhotrer Raat*, among many other projects. He was always fully absorbed in his work, and always looked for improvements,” he reminisced. “Losing a close confidante is always disheartening and this loss was no exception.”

“I worked with him on many tele-fictions, and each one of his creations has brought me accolades,” says Abul Hayat. “I will always remember him as a man with a golden mind, who helped redefine the definition of entertainment in the industry.”

Mohammad Barkatullah rests at the Martyred Intellectuals’ Graveyard in Mirpur. He has left behind his wife acclaimed dancer Zeenat Barkatullah, and his daughters, Bijori Barkatullah and Kajori Barkatullah – the former being a popular actor and media personality.



Bijori Barkatullah with her father, Mohammad Barkatullah.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Music Composers’ Association of Bangladesh unveiled



Renowned composers and music directors are members of the association led by Sheikh Sadi Khan.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT DESK

To combat various professional problems plaguing music composers and directors, Music Composers’ Association of Bangladesh officially announced its proceedings on August 4 at a press conference. Renowned composer Sheikh Sadi Khan will act as the convener of the association, whereas Naquib Khan, Anisur Rahman Tonu, Farid Ahmed, Foad Naser Babu, Shawquat Ali Emon, Bappa Mazumder, Partha Mazumder, Partha Barua, S I Tutul and Ripon Khan are the members of the committee. Senior music directors Ali Hossain, Alam Khan and Mohammad Shahanwaz, among other noted musicians, are advisors to the association. “We hope to be inclusive in our efforts, and solve the issues that music directors and composers have to face throughout their careers,” said Foad Naser Babu.

“I am overwhelmed by the audience’s acceptance”

Solaiman Khoka on ‘Aujantrik’

SHARMIN JOYA

Solaiman Khoka has been a writer, producer and actor at Bangladesh Betar since 1972. He has written and produced numerous radio programmes over the years, and acted in several shows as well. He also works on television. Recently, he was lauded for his performance in the Ashfaq Nipun directorial Eid special short film, *Aujantrik*. In a recent conversation with *The Daily Star*, Solaiman Khoka shared how he came across *Aujantrik* and more.

How did you land the lead role in ‘Aujantrik’?

It is an interesting story. Ashfaq Nipun noticed me in Mostofa Sarwar Farooki’s telefilm *Ayesha* recently, on YouTube. After that, he got in touch with me, and approached me for *Aujantrik*. Initially, I was worried that today’s generation will not be able to connect with the lead character, as he is an old man. However, the positive reactions took me by surprise. I am really grateful that the director had complete faith in me. I am overwhelmed by the audience’s acceptance.

You are still working at Bangladesh Betar. Tell us about your productions.

I joined Chattogram Betar a year after Liberation War. I also completed my degree that year. I did many programmes for Dhaka Betar as well. *Dorpon* was one of my longest magazine shows



Solaiman Khoka in action in ‘Ajantrik’.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

on radio, which I produced for ten years. One of my productions, *Joddha*, featuring Bulbul Ahmed, was dedicated to 25 years of the Liberation War. Another one of my shows, *Amader Satkahon*, completed 100 episodes this February.

You were also active on the theatre stage. How did your journey begin in that field?

I did numerous plays during my school days. After

the Liberation War, I wrote *Rokter Binimoye*, which was staged on January 29, 1972, in Chattogram. It was based on the riots before the war. The show did well, and I received many offers after it. I was an active theatre artiste till 1992. I worked with tropes like Samakal and Oboshor. Later, I got busy with writing and producing for the radio, which I continue to do till date.