



Iqbal Ahmed, Shaheen Samad, Minakshi, Lata and Sadya Afreen Mallick during Chhayanaut's celebration of Independence Day at the Central Shahid Minar.

# From prisoner of war to CULTURAL ICON

Ekushey Padak awardee Iqbal Ahmed relives his wartime story



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

In 1970, a young Rabindra Sangeet singer caused a sensation, when his rendition of "Jani Jani Tumi" made its way to number one rank on the country's best-selling chart. This feat shattered the general assumption that Rabindra Sangeet was not "commercially viable". Only a year later, he was imprisoned and tortured by the Pakistani Army, formally accused of "inciting the people with nationalistic and revolutionary songs".

Iqbal Ahmed's legacy, however, started in the late 1960s, when he led spirited groups of activists in favour of our Independence movement—not with weapons, but with the power of Gono Sangeet (patriotic songs for the masses) and Rabindra Sangeet. A student of the Department of Economics at Dhaka University, the cultural secretary of DUCSU (Dhaka University Central Students' Union), and a leading member of Sangskritik Sansad, a progressive cultural body of DU, Iqbal Ahmed would play a role in the mass uprising of 1969 with his deep, roaring voice.

**"They recorded with sophisticated instruments, as I sang 'Amar Shonar Bangla' and 'Biplob er Rokte Rangano'. Little did I know that it was heard throughout the interrogation center with their powerful speakers."**

His fearless presence in the cultural arena, which extended to just days before West Pakistan launched a genocide upon us, had brought him in their crosshairs. In fact, he had delivered memorable Gono Sangeet performances on television only two days prior to the military operation. He also created an impact in the programme titled "Nobin er Aloke", where his powerful speech about oppression and economic deprivation of Bengalis, inspired many watching the programme.

"At three in the morning sometime in May, they (the Pakistani army) knocked on our door, asking for me and my brothers," said Iqbal Ahmed, speaking with The Daily Star at their family residence in Gulshan, remembering the day on which he was

arrested. "Who is Wahidul Haque?" demanded an officer from the Field Interrogation Unit (FIU), when Iqbal was brought in for questioning. "Did you go to India with him?"

Iqbal, also a student of Chhayanaut's third batch, and later an instructor there, was mentored by the likes of Sanjida Khatun, Wahidul Haque, Zahidur Rahim, Sheikh Lutfor Rahman, Altaf Mahmud, and Kalim Sharafi. He, alongside his troupe of singers, was the central figure of the cultural activities of the Sarbadaliya Chhatra Sangram Parishad (All Party Student Action Committee) and its programmes, delivering patriotic slogans and singing their hearts out at jump-packed venues like the Paltan *maydan* and the Shahid Minar.

Alongside other cultural activists and students, they would go around the city in places like New Market, Azimpur, Gopibag, Farmgate, Sadarghat etc, in open defiance of the administration.

"As they interrogated me, I understood that they had been monitoring me, as Wahid bhai did ask me to go to India to lead a Gono Sangeet group there," asserted the singer.

The brutal atrocities and tortures committed in the camp, over 7 months in 1971, left him traumatised. "Where do I even start? The day I was transferred to the 'prisoner of war' camp, they had asked us (the prisoners) to do a 'frog jump' across the field. I was obviously not accustomed to this. I faltered after two steps. As a soldier started thrashing me with the butt of his rifle, I somehow crawled through," said Iqbal. "I felt like I had received an electric shock. It turned out that he had kicked me on my spine, with full force."

On the same day, the captors once took the singer to an empty spot in the field, and asked him to shout "Iqbal Gaddar!" (Traitor Iqbal!) "Before I could understand what was going on, one of them took a hold of me, as if to hug me. The other thrashed me so hard, so mercilessly, that I sustained internal injuries," he said. "As I tried to get up, bleeding from the ears, I felt like my head was exploding. He noted that even after undergoing

purpose of documenting evidence against him.

"They recorded with sophisticated instruments, as I sang 'Amar Shonar Bangla' and 'Biplob er Rokte Rangano'. Little did I know that it was heard throughout the interrogation center with their powerful speakers," reminisced Iqbal. "I was so weak from the beatings they gave me, that I could barely sing. However, at that point, I was instilled with pride—it was a unique experience."

Unbeknownst to him, all the prisoners at the center had heard him, and had derived courage from his voice. The incident had been narrated and documented by a Bengali CSP officer, who was interrogated in the same building, at that time.

"Towards the end of October, I was transferred from the army prison camp in the cantonment, to the Dhaka Central Jail. I don't know why, but life changed for the better from then on," he said. "As the end came near, we used to hear the sound of bombing by plane, and rumours would float around that the end of the Pakistani oppression was near. We heard flares and gunshots, and knew that we were nearing victory. However, a fear still lurked, whether or not they would kill us before the Mukti Bahini could reach us?"

On December 16, the jailor let the prisoners know that Pakistan had officially surrendered at the Race Course field.



Iqbal Ahmed with Qayyum Chowdhury, during an album launch ceremony in 2003.

"We got out on December 17, and as the Mukti Bahini supposedly tore through the gate, I saw some of the jailors change into a convict's uniform, in order to escape scrutiny!"

As Iqbal Ahmed walked free after eight months of inhuman torture, not knowing where exactly his parents were living, the singer went to his aunt's residence in Dhanmondi. His parents picked him up later that afternoon. "After an emotional reunion, we went home to many visitors, who had come to rejoice with us. Suddenly, a microbus belonging to a television channel came by, and out emerged Mustafizur Rahman, Sakhina Akhtar and another producer."

"They informed me that they were about to start Bangladesh Television, and wanted me to participate in its first musical programme. When I reached the station, I met Babu bhai (Zahidur Rahim) and Bilkis Nasiruddin, two of my mentors, and they wanted me to take the lead," smiled Iqbal. "Your mentors asking you to take the lead in their presence, there is nothing quite like it."

After our independence, the eminent singer represented Bangladesh in important delegations, including 1972's "Maitree Mela" held in Kolkata, and the Berlin Youth Festival in 1973, after receiving blessings from Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman himself. In 1973, he received the Ford Foundation Scholarship to study in Cambridge University, from where he obtained his PhD in Economics.

The many renditions of Rabindra Sangeet and Gono Sangeet recorded in his voice still endure as an exemplary mix of power and grace, as evident in his HMV records in 1970, and CDs published by Bengal Foundation and Asia Foundation in later years.

For all of Iqbal Ahmed's talent, contribution, and sacrifices, his Ekushey Padak this year only cements the fact that the artiste is not only a musical force, but also a cultural icon who showed courage and fought for our country, when it was most needed.

Interviewed by Mahfuz Anam, Editor & Publisher, The Daily Star, and Sadi Mohammad Shahnewaz

## 'Amar Bhashar Chalachchitra 1428' kicks starts at TSC

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT DESK

The 20th edition of 'Amar Bhashar Chalachchitra 1428', organised by Dhaka University Film Society (DUPS), starts today. The will take place at the TSC premises of Dhaka University and will end on February 26.

The largest festival of Bangla language films will commence on Tuesday, February 22, 2022, with the screening of Satyajit Ray's "Agantuk". The day will also feature the screening of Giasuddin Selim's "Monpura" Masud Hasan Ujjal's "Unoponchash Batash", and Abdullah Mohammad Saad's "Rehana Maryam Noor".

Nineteen contemporary and classic feature films, and one documentary, including "Nonajoler Kabbo", "Raat Jaga Phool", "Lal Moroger Jhuti", "Mujib Amar Pita", and "Chandrabati Kotha", will be screened at the five-day festival. The tickets will be available at the venue.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

## 'Payer Tolay Mati Nai' to screen in six international film festivals

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT DESK

After screening in the 26th Busan International Film Festival and 52nd Goa International Film Festival, the film "Payer Tolay Mati Nai" will be previewed in six international film festivals in three countries (Japan, India and Nepal).

They are—17th Osaka Asian Film Festival, 13th Bengaluru International Film Festival, 20th Pune International Film Festival, 6th Orange City International Film Festival, Latur International Film Festival, and 5th Nepal International Film Festival.

Produced by Abu Shahed Emon, it is Mohammad Rabby Mridha's debut directorial. Beginning from March 3, the film will be showcased in these festivals, during the entire month.

In association with Impress Telefilm and Batayan Productions, the film is presented by Box Office and produced by Golpo Rajjo Films.

The film stars Deepanwita Martin, Mostafa Monwar, and Priyam Archi among others.

## Beshi Joss Customs launches their first signature guitar series

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT DESK

Beshi Joss Customs recently launched their first signature series guitar. 'KFA Lunatic Series' of Kazi Faisal Ahmed from Artcell, who is also the first endorsed artiste for 'Reuben Custom Guitars' by Beshi Joss Customs.

Beshi Joss Customs is the only local musical instrument manufacturer company, that endorsed an artiste from Bangladesh.

"Seeing Faisal bhai play our guitar on stage is the proudest moment for my team and me," the founder of Beshi Joss Customs Nafeez Al Amin expressed.

Kazi Faisal Ahmed from Artcell and Shakib Chowdhury from Cryptic Fate were present at the launching ceremony. Beshi Joss Customs hosted the launching event in collaboration with Music Point. Primarily, the guitar will be available in four colours: white, black, bumblebee yellow, and blood red. It is priced at BDT 27,000.



(L) Iqbal Ahmed (Centre) plays the harmonium, singing Gano Sangeet on a truck. (R) An article highlighting Iqbal Ahmed's rendition of 'Jani Jani Tumi', reaching number one rank on the national chart.



arrested. "My uncle and aunt were visiting us at the time. I thought of escaping, jumping off the second floor balcony, but saw numerous soldiers stationed around the house, pointing their guns at us."

Iqbal's father, Dr M Ishaque, was the director of the Jute Research Institute, where they lived. "They showed respect to him at first, making it seem like a routine check. An officer even pretended to my father that it had to be some kind of a mistake, and they would soon let us go," he recalled.

The army took Iqbal, his two brothers, his uncle and a male house help, but later released the others after several days of long, targeted questionings. "When I heard one of them shout 'Yeh saala gaddar hain' (This man is a traitor), I instantly knew that the arrest was not random," said the singer.

Iqbal spent the night in an army "safe house", and was later imprisoned with more than 350 others at a war prisoners' camp in

medical treatment and surgery in Switzerland, years after the war, he could not fully recover.

One day, Iqbal recalls, he caught a lucky break when, before a torture session, he was assigned to kitchen duty.

"As they were about to take us there, a soldier came and asked for a 'clean' person, who could carry water back and forth from the kitchen. I was picked, and while I was carrying the heavy jerrycans, he asked me why I was imprisoned. To my utter shock, he told me that we were doing the right thing," said Iqbal, who initially thought that it was a trap.

"I think that person actually saved me from a lot of torture on that particular occasion; but to this day, I don't know why he did it. I think he belonged to the Baloch regiment."

Perhaps the most poetic moment of the singer's imprisonment came when he was taken to the Field Interrogation Center (FIC), and was asked to record some songs for the