

My life is blessed, I do not have any regrets

REZWANA CHOUDHURY BANNYA

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HASHIBUR REZA KALLOL

Rezwana Choudhury Bannya, the legendary Bangladeshi Rabindra Sangeet artiste, embarked on her musical journey with a unique blend of academic pursuit and passion for

music. Born into a family with a deep appreciation for the arts, Bannya initially enrolled in Economics at Dhaka University, a practical choice influenced by her family. However, her passion for music fueled her desire to pursue her studies on a different path at Shantiniketan, steering her toward a lifelong dedication to classical music and cultural preservation.

We talk to the esteemed Rabindra Sangeet exponent ahead of Eid and Pohela Boishakh.

You have been enchanting us with your melodies for 50 years. How was this journey for you?

My companionship with music has been going on for as long as I can remember. Professionally, I started singing in 1975, but music has been with me my whole life.

I dedicated my life to music and it has given me everything. I couldn't ask for anything else.

Kanika Bandyopadhyay mentioned that you were her favourite student. Beyond your student-teacher relationship, if you could reflect on the special bond you had with her.

When I went to Shantiniketan in 1975 as a student, she as been the head of Sangeet Bhavana. Later, she became the principal. At that time, the teacher-student relationship was just as it was. The class was taken, programme were organised, and rehearsals were held.

The bond with her grew after I came back to Bangladesh. Kanika Bandyopadhyay once came to Bangladesh in 1986, and I told her then that I wanted to go back to Shantiniketan. I wanted to learn from her and she was very happy about that. She retired by the time when I went back to Shantiniketan. It was in 1990/1991. I went straight to her house with my children. I stayed there initially. Later, I got a house of my own. Back then, I dedicated all my time to learn from her and I learned a lot. The special bond, that she loved me like her daughter, was created during that time.

Rabindra Sangeet should not be 'altered' and only be sung in the purest form. Do you agree with this sentiment?

Firstly, whether Rabindra Sangeet should be sung purely or altered, I don't think there's a definitive answer. One aspect is maintaining the

original lyrics or singing as we've learned from our gurus versus singing in one's own style.

Rabindranath Tagore said himself, 'Let my songs be my songs'. And it's not possible to 'modify' Rabindra Sangeet for any betterment because who can know or feel his lyrics, tunes, and philosophy better than Rabindranath himself?

But everything indeed changes.

We do not sing Rabindra Sangeet as we used to 100 years ago, and it will keep changing its form over the next 50 years for better or worse. What's more important is to have respect for Rabindranath in every artiste's heart to sing his songs. That's the beauty of Rabindra Sangeet even after so many years, we are still singing it and resonating with it. It's universal and every artist who sings Rabindra Sangeet makes it their own.

You have received Swadhinata Padak, Banga Bhushan, Padma Shri, and every other accolade. How much value can these awards put in your contribution?

It's an absolute honour to receive all these awards. When an artiste receives acceptance and recognition, it certainly inspires them. I feel so blessed, honestly. And this honour is not just mine; it belongs to the cultural heritage of Bangladesh and all its people.

The Hindustan Times once featured you in 'The Influence of Baul on Rabindranath', which is quite an esteemed and intriguing topic.

The influence of Baul on Rabindranath underwent a significant transformation at a

certain period. However, this was not throughout Rabindranath's musical career. When Rabindranath used to visit East Bengal from 1889 to 1901, he was acquainted with the Bauls here, interacted with them, and listened to their songs. We first encountered the influence of Baul in his songs during the partition of Bengal (1905). We find many songs from that era, where he used Baul tunes. However, he was more attracted to Baul's philosophy than Baul's music, which we observed gradually at Shantiniketan. He returned to Shantiniketan in 1901 and started the ashram, and continued to keep the Baul philosophy alive until he died in 1940. In his songs depicting nature, love, country, and diverse themes, we see a more pronounced Baul influence in terms of philosophy than Baul music itself. The songs he created during his stay at Shantiniketan, we can estimate that 60 to 70 percent of his songs have some form of Baul influence, whether it's in the lyrics, melody, thoughts, emotions, or movements.

Throughout your career, you have sung with bands like Souls and Renaissance, and also partook in playback singing as well. Was it intentional to not pursue this specific path as a career choice?

I have given everything to Rabindra Sangeet, and it has given everything to me. I never wanted to sing anything else. When I was required to sing Rabindra Sangeet for a film, I voiced a few songs in both Bangladesh and West Bengal, but that was never my plan or goal.

Is there any unfulfilled desire in terms of the extensive work you've done in the arena of Rabindra Sangeet?

I want to refer to a song of Rabindranath, *Diyechhi Joto, Niyechhi Tar Beshi*. I have received a lot. I don't want to calculate what I have done and what I have gained. My life is so full of blessings, that I don't have any regrets.

Transcribed by Zarin Tasnim



PHOTOS: SHAHREAR KABIR HEEMEL

COUNTRYWIDE

Low price frustrates betel nut growers

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

Despite a bumper yield this year, betel nut growers in different districts of Rangpur region remain upset for not getting the expected market price of the item.

The money generated from selling betel nuts provides additional financial supports to many farmers in the northern region.

Farmers in the region said this year the yield of betel nut is two times more than the previous year.

Due to increase in production and huge supply in local markets betel nut farmers are compelled to sell their produces at a lower price, compared to the previous years.

Rangpur region has a market of betel nut worth take several hundred crores.

Farmers said they were selling each betel nut between Tk 1 to Tk 3 this year, which was between Tk 5 to Tk 7 during this time last year.

Meanwhile, taking advantage of the bumper yield and huge supply of betel nut, wholesalers are buying the item at a low price, depriving the farmers from fair price.

Local farmers are compelled to sell their product at a low price as the yield is almost double than that of the previous year, a number of growers said.

Although almost all the farmers have 20 to 50 betel nut trees surrounding their homestead, many of them are

cultivating the crop commercially.

Each tree produces 250 to 800 pieces of betel nuts and continues the process for 20 to 30 years or so.

As betel nuts are produced naturally, farmers do not have to spend extra money apart from applying organic fertilisers and water.

Farmer Quader Ali of Nazimkhan village in Kurigram's Rajarhat upazila said last year he got Tk 5.7 lakh from selling betel nuts produced in 250 trees.

This year, he is yet to sell his betel nuts as the price is quite low in local markets.

Madhav Chandra Das of the village said he sold betel nuts from his 10 trees worth Tk 6,500, which was sold for Tk 17,000 last year.

"As I needed money on an emergency basis, I was compelled to sell the product at a lower price," Madhav said.

Nabir Hossain, a betel nut wholesaler at Lalmonirhat's Durakuti Haat, said as there is huge supply of betel nuts in local markets, so price is quite low this year.

According to Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE), there are about 50 to 55 lakh betel nut trees in Rangpur region's 5 districts - Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Gaibandha and Nilphamari.

Besides, there are nearly 1,600 betel nut orchards in those districts and each orchard has 200 to 2,000 trees.

The region produces nearly 300 crore betel nuts every year.

'No Eid joy for us this year'

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"We are not in the mood to celebrate so there are no preparations for Eid this year. We are not doing well," she said with a world of worry etched on her face.

After losing her husband to Covid-19 in 2021, her two sons are all she has. Ainul, who joined the mariner's job in 2016, consequently became the sole breadwinner of the family of three.

Since the hijacking of the ship, Lutfa had barely slept and has fallen ill twice.

"Even sleeping pills don't help ... I don't like staying on my own with so much tension. I asked my younger son to not stay out of home for too long."

She said they had high hopes after top officials of SR Shipping at an iftar assured the families that the hostages would be released



Lutfa Ara Begum showing a photo of her son Ainul Hoque, who is one of the 23 crew members held hostage by Somali pirates.

before Eid. "But it now seems it will take more time."

Last Friday, the pirates had allowed Ainul to call his mother.

He said they were suffering from a severe crisis of water. They have so far been allowed to bathe twice

a week and from next week they might be allowed to do so only once a week. It's tougher for my son since he has to work in a heated engine room.

"All I pray for now is the safe and quick return of all the crew members. May

Allah guide the pirates to the right path so they release the hostages soon."

General steward Mohammad Noor Uddin's family too were refraining from Eid preparations. His wife, toddler son and elderly mother live in his home in South Sahmirpur of Chattogram's Karnaphuli upazila.

"There is no Eid joy for us this year. We don't even have time to think about shopping with so much worries for my husband," Noor's wife Jannatul Ferdous said.

"It will be Eid for us only when my husband will be released and back home safe."

Fourth Engineer Tanveer Ahmad's mother Josna Begum has been in a state of discomfort since the incident.

"If there is no peace in my

mind, how can I enjoy Eid? I will spend the day praying to Allah for the safe return of my son."

According to sources, negotiations with the pirates for the release of the hostages are almost at the final stage. The owning firm is taking preparations for the next steps, including sending the ransom money.

Officials SR Shipping, a subsidiary of KSRM Group, however, are yet to confirm the finalising of negotiations.

Mizanul Islam, media adviser to KSRM Group, said, "There is progress in talks with the pirates. But no specific date or time has been fixed yet."

The officials said they are now hoping that the hostages would be freed and brought back home within a couple weeks after Eid.

BJMC racking up losses

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employees are engaged in the upkeep of the jute mills in Khulna, where the government is spending Tk 1.8 crore every month on their salaries.

In the last two months, 82 Ansar members were struck off the payroll, said Golam Rabbani, the regional director of BJMC in Khulna.

The rest of the officials and employees, who are engaged in leasing out the jute mills to the private sector, are still on the payroll, he added.

The lease agreements of 14 jute mills have been completed, said Md. Nasimul Islam, general manager of admin & CS) of BJMC, adding that six jute mills that were handed over are in production.

"The longer the government-owned jute mills stay shut, the higher the losses the BJMC would incur in their upkeep," said Mahmudul Huq, former deputy managing director of Janata Jute Mills, one of the profitable private sector jute mills.

Valuable machinery parts could be siphoned off and sold if the factories remain shut for

an extended period, he said.

"It is inevitable," said the jute industry veteran.

Subsequently, he suggested converting the land of some of the bigger mills, especially those that are in Dhaka, Khulna and Chattogram, into special economic zones.

"They could be used for any industrial purpose just like the Adamjee SEZ, which

is a very successful model of regeneration of industrial land," he added.

Augmenting the capacity of the closed mills will increase the overall production capacity of the jute sector.

"That will only result in lower prices for the jute goods, in both the export and local market - much to the overall detriment of the sector," Huq added.

Be sensible while dealing

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The PM said it must be ensured that juvenile offenders do not come close to criminals, Cabinet Secretary Md Mahbub Hossain told a press briefing after the meeting at the Prime Minister's Office.

"They [juvenile offenders] should be given various scopes so that they can return to their normal lives," he quoted the premier as saying.

The PM asked the social welfare ministry to undertake more projects to make sure that the juvenile offenders get adequate services.

The cabinet secretary said three correction centres are now in the country, which are overcrowded. In this regard, the PM has instructed the authorities concerned to increase the number of such centres.

Counselling services

must be there in correction centres because psychiatrists play a vital role in correcting the juvenile offenders, the PM said.

She also directed the authorities to include parents, teachers, and local representatives in their rehabilitation process.

The cabinet meeting also approved the draft of the National Logistics Policy-2024.

The policy's objective is that all the relevant ministries will take steps to ensure quick delivery of goods at low cost, the cabinet secretary added.

There will be a council led by the premier to oversee the implementation of the policy, he said.

He said the policy is part of initiatives for the graduation to a developing nation status in 2026.

BCL leader to get back seat at Buet dormitory

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Buet students protested the gathering in the middle of night as student politics on the campus was banned.

The ban was imposed after some BCL activists killed second-year student Abrar Fahad at the university's Sher-e-Bangla Hall on October 7, 2019.



PHOTO: STAR

Wholesalers trading betel nut at Durakuti Haat in Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila.