



Ravi Shankar and George Harrison at the press conference for The Concert for Bangladesh.

# Global Chords of Freedom

Artists, Poets, and the War of '71

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MIFTAHUL JANNAT

The Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 was not just a struggle fought on the battlefields, but a humanitarian crisis that captured the world's attention. Millions of refugees poured into India, war crimes devastated families, and the call for justice echoed beyond Bangladesh. While political leaders deliberated and soldiers fought, a different kind of global ally emerged—artists, musicians, writers, and poets who lent their voices to Bangladesh's cause. Their words, music, and actions played a crucial role in mobilising global support. While bullets and bombs shaped the battlefield, music, poetry, and art stirred the world's conscience in '71.

**Gobinda Halder: Unsung Lyricist of the War**

During the 1971 Liberation War, *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* inspired millions through its broadcasts and songs. Some of the most iconic war songs of that time—including *Mora Ekti Phul Ke Bachabo Bole Juddho Kori*, *Purbo Digonte Shurjo Utheche*, and *Ek Shagor-e Rokter Binimoye*—which became anthems of resilience and freedom, were written by Gobinda Halder.

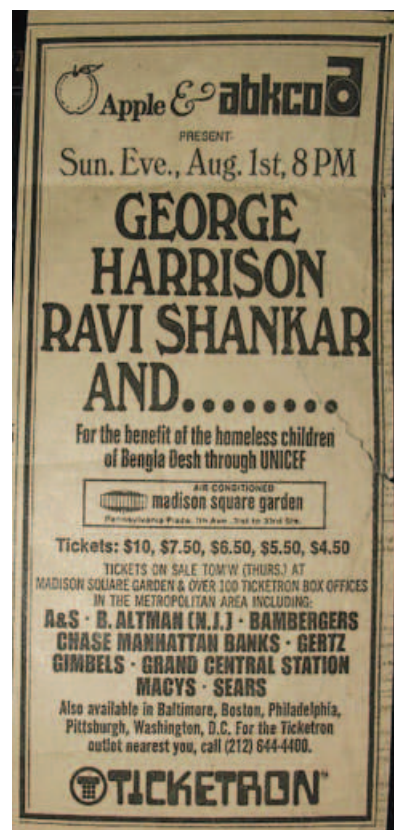
As the war erupted, *Swadhin Bangla*

*Betar Kendra* became a vital resistance station. During this time, radio officials sought to move away from the usual practice of airing old recorded songs and instead feature live music performances. Initially, the station broadcast songs written before the war, but as the conflict progressed, the need for new lyrics and expressions grew.

Kamal Lohani, activist and news editor of the station, found exactly what was needed in Gobinda Halder's diary, boldly labelled *Joy Banglar Gaan*, providing fresh and relevant material for the broadcasts. "While we were searching for a lyricist who could capture the essence of our country's struggle, Gobinda Halder appeared like a saviour with two notebooks loaded with 24 to 30 songs," remarked Lohani later.

At the revolutionary radio station, senior composer Samar Das received the diaries from Lohani for consideration. Lohani later enquired with composer Apel Mahmud about why nothing was being done with the diaries. Intrigued, Mahmud read through them and was inspired by Halder's words. He chose to compose *Mora Ekti Phul Ke Bachabo Bole Juddho Kori*, which was first aired in the first week of June, becoming an iconic song that inspired many during and after the war.

Following its success, Samar Das



A poster of The Concert for Bangladesh.

quickly composed another legendary song from Halder's diary, *Purbo Digonte Shurjo Utheche*. On 20 December, Halder penned another masterpiece—*Ek Shagor-e Rokter Binimoye*—a true tribute to martyrs, which he completed in just one day.

During the war, there was a policy that prohibited foreigners from writing or performing songs for the station. As a result, Halder's name was not included in the credits. However, even after independence, his name remained absent from the list of acknowledgements, and he did not receive any royalties for 12 years.

Despite lacking recognition, his devotion to Bangladesh is reflected in his own words during an interview in 2000: "Bangladesh is my land too, and I am also a Bengali. My deep love and respect remain for every person in Bangladesh. This eternal and everlasting love cannot be severed. Bangladesh is the essence of my being. I want to hold onto the memories of Bangladesh and sleep in eternal peace."

He was honoured by the Bangladesh government much later, in 2012. He passed away in 2015, leaving behind a legacy of 3,000 unpublished songs.

**George Harrison & Ravi Shankar: The Concert for Bangladesh**

The Concert for Bangladesh was one of the most remarkable contributions from legendary sitar maestro Ravi Shankar and former Beatles guitarist George Harrison. Moved by the suf-

fering of Bangladeshis, Shankar approached Harrison with the idea of organising a benefit concert. The result was the historic concert at Madison Square Garden in New York on 1 August 1971.

While Harrison was the face of *The Concert for Bangladesh*, the presence of other rock icons lent significant credibility to the cause. Featuring talented musicians like Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, Ringo Starr, and Leon Russell, the concert raised millions for Bangladeshi refugees and brought global attention to the humanitarian crisis.

Bob Dylan performed some of his most stirring songs, including *Blowin' in the Wind*—a poignant reflection on the universal struggle for justice. Eric Clapton, despite his initial hesitation, joined the movement, while Ringo Starr's participation reinforced the collective solidarity of artists. The live album and film of the event continue to resonate today as a symbol of artistic activism.

**Joan Baez: Song of Bangladesh**

Folk singer and activist Joan Baez took the plight of Bangladeshis to heart. She composed *Bangladesh*, a haunting bal-

poem describing the suffering of displaced Bangladeshis. With lines like, "Millions of fathers in rain / Millions of mothers in pain,"

Ginsberg captured the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis. His poem became an anthem of protest, recited at rallies and published worldwide, urging the global community to act.

**Victoria Ocampo: Our Argentine Ally**

Argentine intellectual, writer, and literary critic Victoria Ocampo was another foreign friend of Bangladesh who could not remain silent after hearing of the brutality of the Pakistan Army in 1971. At 80, Victoria Ocampo took to the streets of Buenos Aires with writer Jorge Luis Borges and Father Ismael Quiles, rallying intellectuals in support of Bengalis.

On 11 June 1971, they urged Argentina's foreign minister to send urgent aid to Bangladeshi refugees in India. Their memorandum, widely covered by Argentine media, condemned global inaction and called for tangible support. It sparked a movement in Latin America, leading Venezuelan intellectuals to appeal for international solidarity. Recognised for her efforts, Ocampo received Bangladesh's Friends of Liberation War Honour posthumously in 2012, 33 years after her passing.

Apart from the aforementioned artists, many other renowned poets, writers, and musicians supported us, bringing our war-torn situation to the international stage. Among them were Russian poet Andrei Voznesensky, Oscar-winning British actress Glenda Jackson, singer and composer Sachin Dev Burman, Salil Chowdhury, Lata Mangeshkar, filmmaker and writer Satyajit Ray, artist M.F. Husain, poet Kaifi Azmi, and many others who expressed sympathy and extended their assistance and encouragement during the war.

**The Legacy and Lasting Impact**

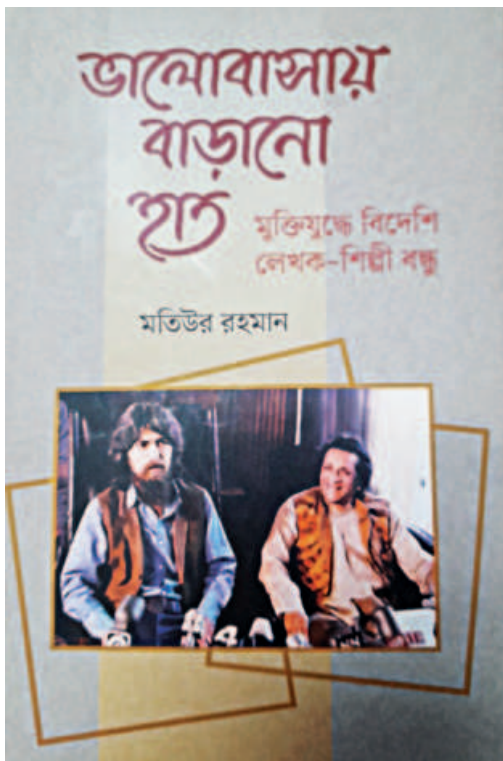
The contributions of these artists, poets, and musicians were not just temporary acts of solidarity; they left a lasting impact on global humanitarian efforts. *The Concert for Bangladesh* set a precedent for future benefit concerts. Joan Baez's song and Allen Ginsberg's poetry continue to serve as powerful reminders of art's ability to shape history. Bangladesh continues to remember these artistic allies with deep gratitude, recognising the profound impact of their creative resistance during its fight for freedom.

Art knows no borders, and it became a weapon for justice in 1971. From the chords of a guitar to the strokes of a poet's pen, these voices beyond borders ensured that Bangladesh's call for freedom echoed across the world.

Miftahul Jannat is a journalist at The Daily Star.



Cover of the book *1971: Mora Ekti Phul Ke Bachabo Bole Juddho Kori*, shedding light on the forgotten legacy of Gobinda Halder and his lyrical contribution to Bangladesh's Liberation War.



Matiur Rahman's *Bhalobasay Barano Haat* presents a powerful and detailed account of the international poets, writers, and artists who stood in solidarity with Bangladesh during the Liberation War of 1971.