



An electric shaving machine used by Altaf Mahmud.

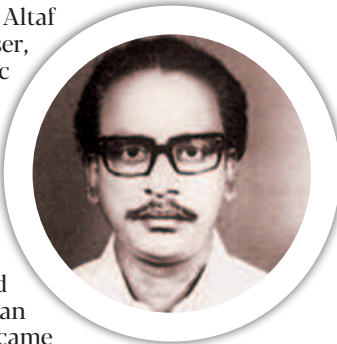
ALTAF MAHMUD (1933–1971)

The music that defied bullets

ANM Altaf Ali, popularly known as Altaf Mahmud, was a celebrated singer, composer, and cultural activist whose life fused music with resistance. Born in Barishal in 1933, he emerged as one of the most influential musical voices of his generation and later became a martyred intellectual of the Liberation War of 1971.

From an early age, music shaped his world. He received his initial training from the violinist Suren Roy and later studied classical music under Ustad Abdul Kader Khan in Karachi. His artistic journey soon became inseparable from political consciousness. During the Language Movement, Altaf Mahmud composed and performed “Aamar Bhaier Raktey Rangano Ekushe February”—a song that would transcend its moment to become a timeless tribute to the martyrs of 1952 and a defining symbol of the Bengali struggle for linguistic and cultural rights.

During the Liberation War, his home became a refuge for freedom fighters and a clandestine storage site for arms and ammunition. On 30 August 1971, the Pakistani Army raided his residence, discovered a steel trunk containing weapons, and arrested him. He was subjected to brutal torture and is believed to have been killed in September 1971. His body was never recovered.



A photograph of artist Qamrul Hasan, filmmaker-activist Zahir Raihan, and others at a meeting of intellectuals in Kolkata, 1971.

ZAHIR RAIHAN (1935-1972)

Filming freedom

Few figures embody the fusion of art and resistance as powerfully as Zahir Raihan. From an early age, his life was shaped by defiance. As a student, he walked out on 21 February 1952—among the first ten to defy the ban on assembly—and paid for it with arrest. Neither prison nor censorship ever managed to silence him.

Raihan’s creative output moved fluidly across literature and cinema, each reinforcing the other as instruments of resistance. From the pages of Aarek Falgun and Hajar Bachhar Dhare to the screen adaptations of Kancher Deyal, Behula, and most famously Jibon Theke Neya, he transformed storytelling into political intervention. Drawing on folk myths and everyday domestic life, he constructed powerful allegories that exposed how cultural identity itself had become a site of struggle under Pakistani rule.

When the Liberation War erupted, Raihan crossed into Kolkata—not to retreat, but to fight with his camera. He raised funds for the war effort and ventured into active conflict zones alongside guerrilla fighters to document the unfolding resistance. His documentaries Stop Genocide and A State Is Born confronted international audiences with the scale of violence inflicted upon Bengalis, forcing the world to bear witness.

In December 1971, after his brother Shahidullah Kaiser was abducted, Zahir Raihan entered Mirpur in search of him. He never returned. His disappearance deprived Bangladesh not only of a visionary filmmaker and writer, but of a future in which culture and politics might have continued to move together in the true spirit of liberation.

A letter written by Zahir Raihan to Kamrul Hasan.

MEHERUNNESA (1942-1971)

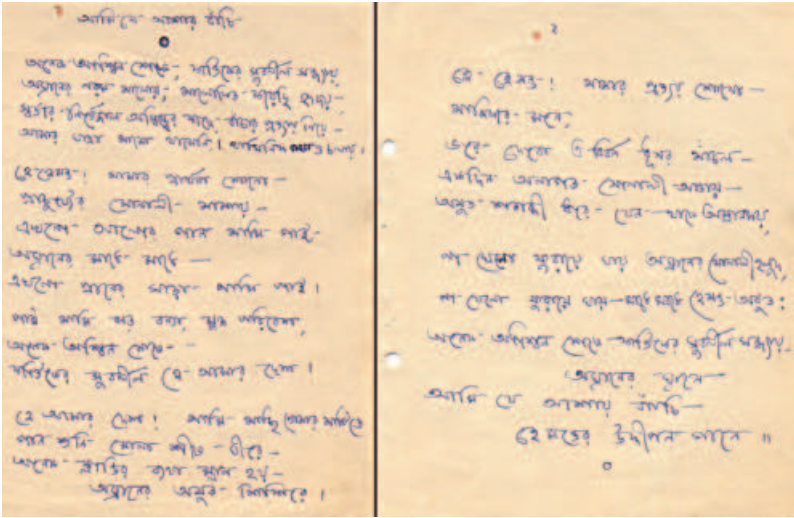
A martyr of poetry and patriotism

Meherunnesa’s life, though brief, burned with rare intensity. A poet of fierce empathy and unyielding conviction, she emerged as a fearless voice during the turbulent decades leading to Bangladesh’s independence. Born in 1942 in Khidirpur, she became a refugee after Partition and migrated to East Bengal with her family in 1950. Largely self-educated, she developed a poetic sensibility shaped by displacement, hardship, and resistance. Forced to abandon formal education at an early age to support her family, she worked at Bangla Academy, Radio Pakistan, and the USIS Library, carving out a life of letters against formidable odds.

As political tensions mounted in East Pakistan, her poetry underwent a decisive transformation. What began as tender reflection grew into sharp, uncompromising dissent. Her poem “Rajbondi”, which carried the slogans Amader Dabi Mante Hobe (Our demands must be met) and Rastrabhasa Bangla Chai (We want Bangla as the state language), drew the attention of state surveillance as early as 1954. Yet she never softened her pen. At a time when Rabindranath Tagore was banned by the Pakistani authorities, she defiantly invoked Gitanjali and Geetbitan in her verse, asserting cultural freedom in the face of repression.

Her final poem, “Jonota Jegeche”, was published on March 23, 1971, just days before anti-liberation forces brutally murdered her and her family.

She was only 29. Yet Meherunnesa’s life and death remain a testament to the power of poetry as resistance and to an unwavering love for her country.



A handwritten manuscript of Meherunnesa’s poetry.

Tikka Khan’s letter of warning

In the first week of September 1971, as the military regime tightened its grip on a defiant Dhaka, a short, chilling letter arrived at the University of Dhaka. Issued under the seal of Martial Law Headquarters, Zone B, it bore the signature of Lieutenant General Tikka Khan—Governor of East Pakistan, Martial Law Administrator, and, by virtue of office, Chancellor of the university. Addressed to Dr Sirajul Islam of the English Department, it warned him against indulging in “anti-state activities.” The language was terse, bureaucratic, and unmistakably threatening.

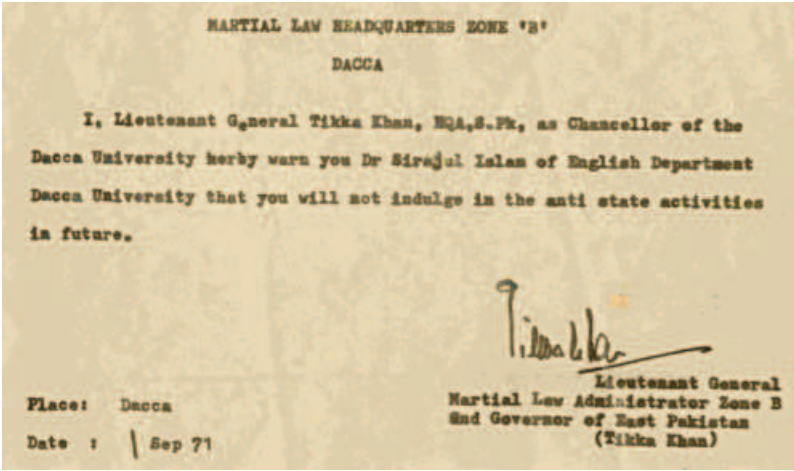
For Dr Serajul Islam Choudhury, the letter was both personal intimidation and a symbol of the regime’s determination to silence intellectual resistance. Though dated 1 September, it was delivered a day later. He recalls how six teachers were named in total: Professor A.B.M. Habibullah of Islamic History; four scholars from the Bengali Department—Dr Muhammad Enamul Huq, Munier Chowdhury, Nilima Ibrahim, and Muhammad Moniruzzaman—and himself. Some were dismissed outright. Others faced punitive threats. Moniruzzaman, ironically punished for patriotic songs he had written for Pakistan but imbued with the spirit of Bengal, was handed a sentence of six months’ imprisonment. The rest received warnings meant to terrify rather than prosecute.

The delivery of the letters, he remembers, felt grotesque—“like a prize distribution ceremony.” One by one, the teachers walked into the office of the Acting Vice-Chancellor, who handed over each sealed envelope as though awarding a certificate. Behind this dark theatre lay a deeper fear: their files were now at the General Headquarters. As Tikka Khan prepared to hand over power to A.M. Malik later that month, he cleared these cases, leaving the academics exposed. “If Pakistan survived,” Choudhury recalls, “we understood it would not be possible for us to keep our jobs; our lives would be endangered.”

These fears were justified when, on 14 December, Al Badr death squads began picking up intellectuals according to a list prepared by Major General Rao Farman Ali. Choudhury notes bleakly that his own name was on it, alongside those who would be killed. He survived only because the authorities did not have his address. Others were not so fortunate. Munier Chowdhury, whose home was clearly identified, was abducted and murdered. Professor Habibullah managed to flee the country just days before the killings.

Why were these academics targeted? Not because they were political activists, Choudhury insists. Their “crime” was intellectual independence: advocating nationalism, secularism, democracy, and socialism; defending university autonomy; protesting Ayub Khan’s ordinances; writing in newspapers that supported the people’s movement; and, most notably, organising a 23 March seminar at Bangla Academy on the future of a secular, democratic, and socialist Bangladesh. In a Pakistan where dissent had become treason, this was enough to attract the wrath of the military state.

Looking back, the letter stands as a stark artefact of a regime’s paranoia—a document meant not merely to warn, but to break the collective spirit of the university. Instead, it became part of the long historical trail that reveals how Bangladesh’s intellectuals chose courage over fear, and how the repression intended to silence them only strengthened the moral force of the liberation struggle.



A cover and a page from Shilalipi, edited and published by Selina Parveen.

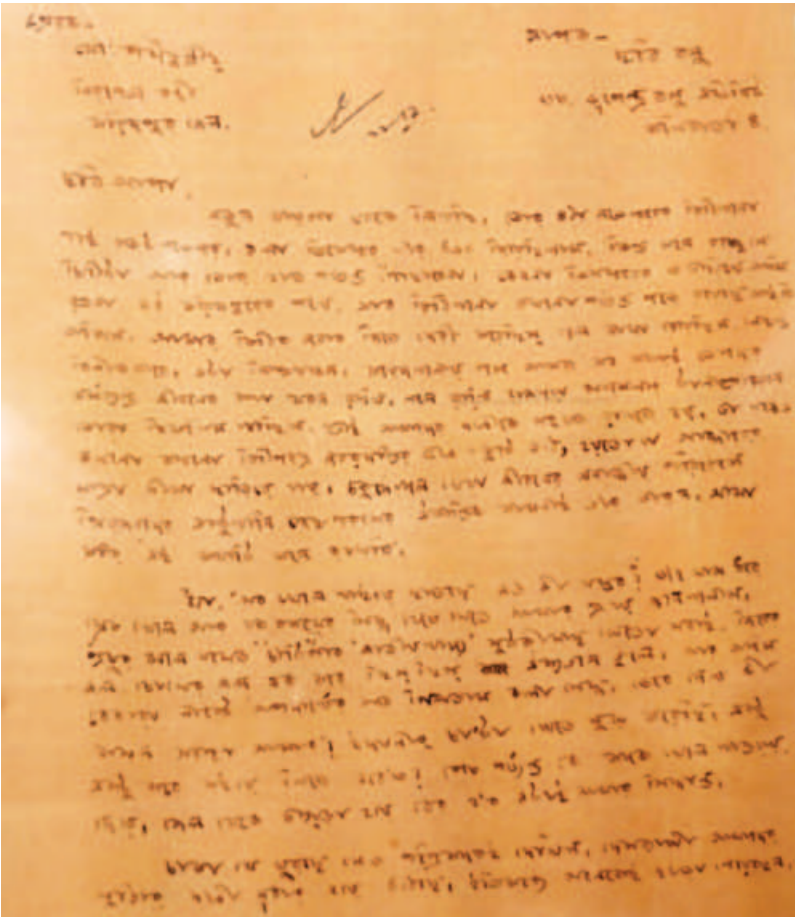
SELINA PARVEEN (1931–1971)

From Shilalipi to the killing fields

Selina Parveen lived a life shaped by care, conscience, and creative resolve. Born on March 31, 1931, she trained as a nurse and joined Mitford Hospital in 1956, dedicating her early professional life to healing. Her commitment to service soon extended beyond medicine. In 1959, she served as matron of Rokeya Hall, and the following year joined the Azimpur Baby Home as a teacher, working closely with children and women at society’s margins.

Alongside her professional responsibilities, Selina Parveen cultivated a powerful literary voice. Throughout the 1960s, her poems and essays appeared in various journals, and she wrote regularly for Weekly Begum and Weekly Lalana. Most significantly, she edited and published the literary magazine Shilalipi, creating a space for reflection, creativity, and quiet resistance at a time when such expression was increasingly fraught.

On December 13, 1971, Selina Parveen was abducted from her residence by Al-Badr, the killing squad of the Pakistan Army. The following day, December 14, she was murdered alongside other intellectuals at the Rayerbazar killing fields in Dhaka. When her body was found, her hands and feet were bound, her eyes covered with cloth, and her body bore the marks of brutal bayonet attacks. Mutilated and left among other corpses and scattered debris, her remains testified to the calculated violence unleashed against those who dared to think, write, and care.



A letter written by political prisoner Shahidullah Kaiser from jail to Chabi Basu of Calcutta.

SHAHIDULLAH KAISER (1927-1971)

A writer made by resistance

Shahidullah Kaiser was one of the most powerful novelists of Bangla literature and a fearless voice in journalism. His life and work were forged in resistance. For his role in the Language Movement of 1952 and his uncompromising criticism of martial law, he endured relentless persecution under the Pakistani state, spending a total of eight years in prison. “I became a novelist because Ayub Khan sent me to jail,” he once declared—an assertion that captured how repression ignited, rather than extinguished, his literary genius.

Behind prison walls, Kaiser turned confinement into creation. Some of his earliest works, including Naam Nei and Jadu-i Halwa, were written inside his cell. It was there that he produced major novels such as Sareng Bou, Shangshaptak, and Rajbondir Rojnamcha—works that would later define modern Bangla fiction for their psychological depth and social realism.

His journalism was no less defiant. Kaiser worked for The Daily Ittefaq before joining the editorial desk of The Daily Sangbad, where he remained until his disappearance.

Kobey Pohabe Bibhabori (When Will the Night End?) was the only novel he wrote outside prison. Begun during the Liberation War, it sought to chronicle the brutality of the Pakistani army.

On 14 December 1971, masked men abducted Shahidullah Kaiser from his home. He was never seen again; his body was never recovered.

