

PRATUL MUKHOPADHYAY, a personification of Ekushey February's spirit

DOWEL BISWAS

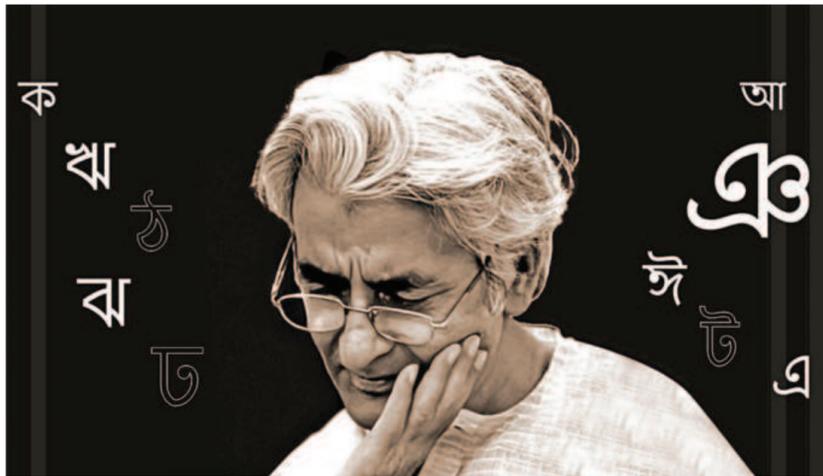
*Ami Banglay gaan gai
Ami Banglar gaan gai
Ami amar amike chirodin ei
Banglay khuje pai*

These verses, simple and intimate, were still being sung by Pratul Mukhopadhyay from his hospital bed days before his death on February 15, 2025. Visitors recall him smiling, stretching the final notes, heedless of frailty: "Ah, kicchhu hobena" (nothing will happen) he told a nurse, as if the act of singing itself could ward off mortality. In that moment, music and identity converged—Bangla was not just a language, it was resistance, ancestral pride, and life itself.

Bengali stage music had rarely been so singular. In the Gananatya and Ganasangeet tradition, songs relied on collective harmony, choirs channeled the pulse of social movements, labour struggles, and dreams of justice. Mukhopadhyay, however, charted a different path. As a lifelong activist, he barely needed to carry instruments on stage, in streets, in marketplaces.

Born in Barishal in 1942, Mukhopadhyay lived through the fractures of partition, the uncertainties of migration, and the routines of middle-class survival. Politics was inherited consciousness, not a slogan. Songwriting became a ledger of conscience: a daily reckoning with history, place, and identity. His voice quivered at the edges, not from lack of technique, but from the weight of feeling itself. Being Bengali was not taught; it had to be experienced.

By the 1990s, Bengali music was shifting. Solo singer-songwriters like Kabir Suman and bands such as Mohiner Ghoraguli challenged norms, but Mukhopadhyay remained unique. His first album, *Jete Hobe* (1994), offered a new sonic terrain: instruments existed,



but the voice took precedence. Interludes were sparse, carrying only him. His phrasing, tremor, and human imperfection became markers of authenticity. In a mainstream of polished, sugary tones, his voice was a deliberate rupture.

His songs were not just music—they were acts of social consciousness. *Dinga Bhasao Sagore* and *February Ekush Tarikh* circulated in college canteens, book fairs, and protests. His phrasing—"Bangla is the water that quenches my thirst, the final, satisfying sip"—was revolutionary, audacious even to 1990s poets. He translated and set to music poems by other Indian-language poets, and adapted Charlie Chaplin's *Limelight Theme*, turning private devotion into playful, universal affection.

His follow-up album, *Otho Hey*, urged listeners to rise with time. On stage, theatricality was inseparable from song: gaze, expression, gesture, and voice worked in concert. Songs like *Saper Mathay Pa Diye Se*

Nache or *Nakosi Skele Africa* showcased a presence that was both political and intimate. Arun Mitra's prose poem *Ami Eto Boyoshe* gained windswept desolation and raw lyricism under his musical translation. His music was constructed, deliberate, yet alive—never sentimental, always precise.

Mukhopadhyay also extended this care to children. *Kuttus Kattas* carried tenderness in nearly every track, nurturing young listeners toward maturity, following a legacy begun by Salil Chowdhury and extended by Sumon, Nachiketa, and Anjan Dutt.

He had no formal training. "I learned by listening, by striking and striking again," he said. Audiences initially stumbled over the integrity of a single, unpolished voice. For a generation navigating stagnant politics and pervasive "feel-good" culture, Mukhopadhyay shattered stillness. He sang truth to power, often in marketplaces and streets, bringing the language of art to those whose lives were too often

overlooked:

"Born, we must die, everyone knows

Yet even in death, there is a difference, brother—

Not all death is the same."

His reflections on partition carried both irony and grief:

"Dujonei Bangali chhilam dekho, dekhi kaandokhan

You are now Bangladeshi, I am called Indian!

—Learning, even while giving slogans, who is brother, who is enemy."

Pratul Mukhopadhyay's songs do not end with the last note, nor with the closing line of a lyric. They live in the pauses between breaths, in the quiet insistence of memory, in the insistence to see, again and again, the face of Bengal. His music asks questions rather than giving answers: What does it mean to belong? How does a language shape a people? How can art persist beyond mortality, beyond stage and record, beyond the limits of a single life?

Ami Banglay Gaan Gai—and in that singing, the work is never truly done.

Bengali stage music had rarely been so singular. In the Gananatya and Ganasangeet tradition, songs relied on collective harmony, choirs channeled the pulse of social movements, labour struggles, and dreams of justice. Mukhopadhyay, however, charted a different path. As a lifelong activist, he barely needed to carry instruments on stage, in streets, in marketplaces.



WHAT'S THE HAPS?

'MATRIKA'

To honour the sacrifices of language martyrs and celebrate the beauty, diversity, and significance of the mother tongue, Students' Community is set to host the second edition of *MATRIKA*. Marking the spirit of February 21, the event will feature a range of competitions, including painting, solo singing, solo dance, poetry recitation, Bangla spelling, Bangla quiz, wall magazine based on the Bangla language, and a photography segment themed around July 2024.



Date: Saturday | Feb 21
Time: 10 am
Venue: T A Ganguli Community Centre

National Film Awards must be transparent: Shakib Khan

In a recent interview, National Film Award-winning actor Shakib Khan outlined his expectations from the new government, calling for transparency, accountability and structural reform in the film sector. He urged that the National Film Awards' judging process be made fully transparent and free from political influence or favouritism, with clear evaluation criteria and strict safeguards against external interference.

Addressing government film grants, he proposed transparent committees, online scoring systems and public reports to curb bias and support genuine talent. Shakib also highlighted the decline of cinema halls, recommending renovation initiatives, tax incentives and public-private partnerships to build modern multiplexes and mini theatres. He further stressed the need for a professional, safe and hassle-free working environment for industry stakeholders.



NEWS

Prices of Ramadan essentials jump

FROM PAGE 12
while the high-end dates have seen a Tk 100 increase per kg, he said, adding that prices of premium dates like Ajwa and Mariyam ranged from Tk 1,000 to Tk 1,400 per kg.

The other fruits also saw similar price jumps.

Sagar bananas were selling for Tk 180 to Tk 200 per dozen, while apples and oranges retailed between Tk 350 and Tk 380 per kg, up from Tk 320 just a week ago.

Papaya prices also climbed, with Thai varieties selling for up to Tk 200 per kg.

In the protein segment, the price of beef remained steady but high at Tk 780 to Tk 800 per kg, while a kg of mutton costs Tk 1,300. However, the prices of fish, particularly of indigenous species like koi and catfish, rose by approximately Tk 100 per kg.

Despite the hike in perishables, the

grocery and poultry sections provided some relief to consumers.

The prices for sugar, oil, lentils and salt remained unchanged, said Md Gofran, proprietor of Cumilla General Store in Kawran Bazar.

"These items haven't seen a pre-Ramadan hike this time," he said.

Poultry prices actually eased slightly due to lower-than-expected demand.

Broiler chicken was selling at Tk 190 per kg, down from Tk 200 two days ago, while Sonali chicken prices dropped by Tk 20 to retail at Tk 300 per kg.

Rice prices also stayed stable, with wholesalers attributing the steady trend to a slight dip in demand during the fasting month.

In Rajshahi's Shaheb Bazar, lemon and lime that sold for Tk 20-25 per four pieces just days ago are now selling for Tk 50-60.

The price of cucumbers also jumped from Tk 60 to Tk 90 per kg, reports our Rajshahi correspondent.

"Like clockwork, the prices go up during Ramadan every year — this is not unexpected," said Monirul Islam, a buyer in Rajshahi.

Bipul Biswas, assistant director of the National Consumer Rights Protection Directorate in Rajshahi, said they are conducting regular drives to curb irregularities.

The situation was similar in Shariatpur's Palong Madhya Bazar, where four pieces of lemon or lime are selling for Tk 60-100 on Thursday morning, reports our Shariatpur correspondent.

Meanwhile, in Chattogram, broiler chicken prices hit Tk 200-220 per kg, while eggplant and cucumber prices rose by Tk 20 per kg. Vendors in the port city blamed limited supply and high demand for the sudden hike.

AL leader dies a day after release on bail

FROM PAGE 2
he suffered a cardiac arrest at Thakurgaon Jail on January 24 but did not receive proper treatment.

Rejecting the allegations of negligence, Md Abu Salam Talukdar, jailer of Thakurgaon Jail, said over the phone that Akram was shifted to Rangpur for better treatment on January 25 after falling ill.

The family claimed adequate medical attention was still not provided in Rangpur.

After being released on bail from the High Court on Tuesday, Akram was taken to Dhaka by his relatives

on Wednesday morning for advanced treatment.

A family member, requesting anonymity, said Akram's condition had already deteriorated significantly by then. He died later that night.

Quamrul Huda, senior jail superintendent in Rangpur, told this newspaper that Akram was admitted to Rangpur Medical College Hospital immediately after he was transferred from Thakurgaon.

He was receiving treatment there under the prison authorities until his release, Quamrul said.

"There's no scope of alleging

negligence in his treatment," he added.

Bulbul Islam, officer-in-charge of Baliadangi Police Station, told The Daily Star that Akram had been arrested on December 11 last year in connection with an explosives case filed earlier with the station, in which he was initially listed as an unidentified accused. A Thakurgaon court later sent him to jail.

Akram was laid to rest at his family graveyard in Barabari Union yesterday afternoon. Several thousand people attended his namaz-e-janaza and burial, witnesses said.

Pearu Sardar and Dhaka's first Shaheed Minar

FROM PAGE 12
construction materials from outside.

At the time, expansion work was underway at Dhaka Medical College campus, and construction workers had piled up bricks and sand in front of the hostel. While the students could gather bricks and sand from there, they were unable to get cement.

At that point, they learned that the contractor had stored a sufficient supply of cement in a nearby warehouse beside the hostel. The students then began searching for the contractor.

When the students discovered that the contractor overseeing the construction was none other than the local community leader, Pearu Sardar, evening was approaching. A few students went to his house under the cover of darkness.

The designer of the first Shaheed Minar, Saeed Haider, wrote in his article "Tomar Amar Ar Pearu Sardar Prothom Shaheed Minar", upon hearing from the students about their plan to build a memorial, Pearu said, "Take the key. Take as much as you need and get to work. Just remember to return the key to me in the morning."

At the time, the students were unaware that on February 21, when protesters had tried to shield themselves from tear gas, the drums of water they used to wash their eyes and faces had been placed there on Pearu's instructions.

Pearu did not stop at providing construction materials for the memorial. He also summoned two masons and instructed them to assist the students.

On the night of February 23, Dhaka's first Shaheed Minar was built on Dhaka Medical College campus. It was informally inaugurated the next morning by Mahbubur Rahman, father of martyr Shafiur Rahman, and

formally on February 26 by Abul Kalam Shamsuddin, editor of The Azad.

According to "Prothom Shaheed Minar O Pearu Sardar", Pearu helped build the students at great risk. As a government contractor, he could have lost his payments, licence, or even been blacklisted if his support for the students became known.

In 1956, when the first official Shaheed Minar was built with funding from the provincial government, Pearu Sardar was again involved as a contractor. On the night of March 25, 1971, the monument was demolished by the Pakistani army with artillery shelling.

Pearu Sardar's role extended beyond building the Shaheed Minar; students fleeing police often sought refuge in his neighbourhood.

Language activist Abdul Matin wrote in his article, "Pearu Sardar's neighbourhood was a safe haven for language activists." Whenever clashes erupted at the university, students would cross the railway tracks and feel safe in the Hossaini Dalan neighbourhood under the protection of Pearu Sardar.

He effectively oversaw the security of the area, personally preventing police raids and calming tense situations. During the regimes of Ayub Khan and Momen Khan, members of the National Students' Federation (NSF) did not dare to enter his neighbourhood to intimidate university students.

According to "Prothom Shaheed Minar O Pearu Sardar", he was the leader of several key neighbourhoods in Dhaka. Through his philanthropy, he helped establish orphanages, mosques, and schools in Old Dhaka.

Though he began as a contractor during the British period, his reputation grew in the Pakistan era, and he was involved in major projects

such as Dhaka Stadium, the Institution of Engineers, Adamjee Jute Mills, Asad Gate, and Dhaka Medical College's nursing hostel.

Pearu Sardar was born in 1893. His father, Munna Sardar, was also an influential figure of Old Dhaka. Pearu passed away on October 5, 1961. His descendants' firm, Pearu Sardar & Sons Decorator, still handles the arrangements for the annual Eid prayers at the National Eidgah.

In 2015, the government of Bangladesh posthumously awarded Pearu Sardar the Ekushey Padak (second-highest civilian award) in recognition of his contributions to the 1952 Language Movement.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Mahbubur Rashid, grandson of Pearu Sardar, said his grandfather's role in the Language Movement, particularly in the construction of the first Shaheed Minar, remains a source of immense pride and inspiration for the family. "We grew up hearing from elders and neighbours not only about his contribution to the movement but also about his generosity."

Mahbubur noted that the government has already honoured Pearu Sardar by naming a school and a road after him. "Although we have not yet taken any initiative at the personal level, we hope to launch welfare activities in his name in the future."

Rough English translation of Syed Shamsul Haque's poem cited at the beginning:

"[Our tear-soaked first Shaheed Minar—

Though it no longer stands today, Its memory lives in the present monument,

And in that memory, Pearu Sardar still remains!"]

Raped, tortured and jailed

FROM PAGE 12
woman for whom she works as domestic help.

After arriving in Saudi Arabia with two other women, she was kept in an office for three days without proper food before being sent to a household.

"They locked the fridge. Even rice was under lock and key. They gave me one piece of flatbread and an egg for the whole day. I worked 24 hours," she said.

When she asked to return to the office, her employer allegedly told her they had paid 10,000 riyals to "buy" her and would not let her go.

After months of abuse, Rima fled to Madinah and later to Makkah, hoping to surrender to the police and be deported.

She was detained briefly but released. Later, she said, she was deceived again by a Bangladeshi woman who promised her work but forced her into prostitution without pay.

"When I refused to continue prostitution and wanted the money, they locked me in a room and tortured and raped me," she said.

She also alleged that a driver associated with her employer raped her before handing her over to the police.

Rima was later jailed for five months on theft charges filed by her employer.

"In jail, they beat me and gave me electric shocks. I kept saying I stole nothing," she said, showing marks on her arms. During detention, medical tests revealed she was pregnant.

"I have no parents. I grew up in an orphanage. Where will I go now?" she asked. "I survived to return home. But how will I live with this child? Who will accept me?"

With no family to receive her at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, she sought help from the Armed Police Battalion and was referred to Brac.

According to Brac Migration Programme data, at least six women have returned from Saudi Arabia while pregnant after facing abuse.

Separate data show that at least 157 migrant workers returned to Bangladesh over the past six years after experiencing sexual or physical assault abroad.

Shariful Hasan, associate director at the Brac Migration Programme and the Brac Youth Platform, said the actual number of survivors may be higher, as many do not report abuse due to fear and social stigma.

Referring to Rima's case, Shaiful questioned the role of the Bangladesh embassy in Saudi Arabia.

"She went with hope. She wanted to live a little better. Instead, she was raped and tortured in her employer's house," he said.

Shaiful said the embassy should have taken stronger action before issuing her travel pass.

"Before giving her a travel pass, the embassy heard her story. Why did they not request the Saudi authorities to investigate? Why was the employer not summoned? Why was enforcement not involved?" he asked.

He also questioned whether the incident was reported to the relevant ministry and what steps were taken.

"They go because they are vulnerable. Once there, they become even more vulnerable. And yet we do not see the state fighting for them from the embassy level," Shaiful said.

Criticising what he described as a tendency to quietly send abused women home, he added, "When crimes go unpunished, the abuse continues. Another woman becomes a victim."

"We often reduce it to numbers... But this is not about numbers. Human rights violations cannot be measured statistically. Each case is a life," he said.

He urged the government to investigate the case thoroughly, including the roles of recruitment agencies and embassy officials, and to adopt a clear standard operating procedure to protect migrant workers.

"If one woman is tortured in Saudi Arabia, it is an injury to all of Bangladesh. Justice must be visible. Accountability must be real," he added.