

# The silver screen speaks of celluloid dreams

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My grandmother-in-law watched the cult Bangla cinema Shujan Shukhi eight times in the halls of Narayanganj, back when she lived in a wooden two-storied bungalow – the downstairs serving as her husband's gaddi, his office and business hub.

My grandmother, hailing from a Talukdar family – a hereditary aristocracy of landholders – caught films during their long vacations in Calcutta. And my mother, growing up in a sprawling clan, would rally her younger sisters and nine brothers to Modhumita, one of the oldest theatres in the country, or to morning shows at the chic mini-theatre Naaz and matinee shows at Gulistan. Those halls brought a revolutionary change to Dhaka's entertainment scene with air-conditioning and superior sound systems, back then.

Primarily known for screening English movies and top-tier Urdu films, the hall complexes built a reputation for being modern and upscale, yet they drew mass audiences. Come September, Cleopatra, Girls, Girls, Girls by Elvis Presley, Urdu hits like

Daman, Do Raha, Arman, and Bangla classics like Pothe Holo Deri, Headmaster, Meghe Dhaka Tara, are movie experiences my mother fondly remembers. Her friend Bachu Khala, a neighbour, was the granddaughter of Pahari Sanyal, a cult figure in Indian Bangla cinema, so films and theatres were truly the heartbeat of their entertainment.

My parents, too, would sneak out, leaving us behind, for screenings of Sunflower or Rebecca. These stories remind me of a Dhaka that was once cultural and alive, where going to the cinema on weekends was the natural choice.

Fast forward to today: Dhaka has transformed into a modern megapolis, buzzing with theatres, concerts, and multiplexes. Just last Saturday, I went with my girlfriends to the posh new Centrepoint Mall in Uttara to watch Daam, a much-hyped film based on a true story.



And at the scenic STAR Cineplex at the Bangladesh Military Museum in Bijoy Sarani for Bonolota Express. I was left in awe – the seating, the leg space, the assortment of munchies, all elevating the experience.

The crowd was overwhelming – hundreds of people, young and

Michael Jackson, Pressure Cooker by Raihan Rafi, Project Hail Mary starring Ryan Gosling (which even our Prime Minister went to watch), and of course The Devil Wears Prada 2, which every ladies' group in Dhaka seems to be waiting for.

What strikes me most is how cinema has woven itself into everyday conversation. Everywhere you go – fashion shows, fairs, coffee meetups – people are asking, "Did you watch Bonolota?" or "Have you seen Pressure Cooker?" or "What did you think of Daam?"

It feels like the old Dhaka spirit has found new life in this modern city, where films are not just entertainment but part of our collective rhythm. Whether you're after a quiet, intimate setting or the buzz of a packed hall, Dhaka caters to both modern and traditional moviegoers.

The city's cinema culture is wonderfully diverse, ranging from luxury private lounges in Gulshan to mainstream blockbuster screenings. For authentic Dhaka vibes and affordability, halls like Modhumita or Balaka are still worth experiencing. Each location offers Dolby surround sound, 3D projection, semi-recliner seating,

and premium lounges – blending international-standard cinema with local cultural appeal.

On the other end of the spectrum, STAR Cineplex has grown into Bangladesh's leading multiplex chain, beginning with its flagship branch at Bashundhara City in Panthapath back in 2004. Over time, it has expanded across the capital with branches in Dhanmondi's Shimanto Shambhar, Mohakhali's SKS Tower, Mirpur's Sony Square, the Bangladesh Military Museum at Bijoy Sarani, and, most recently, Centrepoint Mall in Uttara.

And would you believe Dhaka even has an almost five-star private movie lounge? Cholen Private Movie Lounge in Gulshan 2 is a standalone space booked entirely for your group at a flat rate of Tk 10,000 per night, accommodating 6-10 guests, with complete privacy guaranteed.

So, whether you're in the mood for Hollywood spectacle or a Bangla drama with powerhouse actors, Dhaka's choices tonight are plentiful – and just like in my grandmother's time, cinema remains the city's most beloved conversation starter.

## How S Alam took over SIBL in a day

FROM PAGE 1

they were not the only ones.

That morning, eight SIBL officials and directors, including Rahman and Kabir, were picked up from across the capital: Baridhara, Uttara, Mirpur, Gulshan, Zigatola, Moghbazar, Banani, and Tejgunipara. Some were taken during their morning walk, some while reciting the Quran at home, some in the shower, and some while preparing their children for school.

The six others are then SIBL managing director Shahid Hossain, executive committee chairman Anisul Haque, director Hakim Yusuf Harun Bhuiyan, director Abul Basher Bhuiyan, and independent directors Muinul Hasan and AFM Asaduzzaman.

Thanks to his army background, then SIBL chairman Maj (ret'd) Rezaul Haque was not forcibly picked up. Instead, a senior DGF official called him and asked him to pay him a visit.

Five of them – Rahman, Kabir, Rezaul, Shahid and Basher – spoke exclusively with The Daily Star for the first time since the film-style spy operations. In video and phone interviews taken over nearly a year between September 2024 to December 2025, they spoke at length about how SIBL was taken over by S Alam with the help of the intelligence agency.

That morning, all nine were preparing to attend SIBL's 404th board meeting, scheduled for 2:35pm at City Centre in Dhaka's Motijheel. Instead, they were taken to the DGF office in Kachukhet and held in separate rooms, each unaware the others were there, as the bank's takeover unfolded inside the spy office.

Within months, SIBL's new management began disbursing large loans to businesses linked to S Alam and his family, draining the once-stable bank of liquidity.

By September 2024, SIBL's total loan exposure reached Tk 37,841 crore, of which more than Tk 7,600 crore went to S Alam Group and its affiliates. At the time, SIBL's non-performing loans surged to Tk 23,575 crore or 62.3 percent of the total loans disbursed, and the bank's capital turned negative.

Ultimately, the lending spree left SIBL cash-strapped and led to its forced merger with four other troubled banks in 2025.

**S ALAM AT DGF OFFICE**  
Inside the intelligence office, food was arranged for the hostages, but most were in panic and unable to eat. Several grew dizzy.

"When my blood pressure shot up, a doctor was summoned and he advised that they send me home. But they did not. They eventually let me lie down on a bed," Rahman recalled.

Elsewhere in the building, Humayun Kabir, the board secretary, was taken to a conference room lined with portraits of senior intelligence officers. There, he saw someone he never expected to see in such a place. It was Mohammed Saiful Alam, chairman of the Chattogram-based S Alam Group, sitting as if he was in charge.

Six of the officials and directors that were picked up confirmed that they saw S Alam in the DGF office.

"I was stunned," Kabir said. "He told me to sit. Then he asked me to move the board meeting from Motijheel to the Westin Hotel."

S Alam handed him three documents – signed resignation letters from the bank's chairman, managing director and the executive committee chairman.

Their signatures were obtained on blank sheets of paper, later filled in as resignations citing "personal reasons," Kabir added. The Daily Star has obtained two of these letters.

"I was forced to resign under threat of police remand. One of my junior officers showed me a weapon and warned that I would be taken into

custody," Maj (ret'd) Rezaul told The Daily Star.

Just months earlier, on January 5, 2017, S Alam Group had taken control of Islami Bank Bangladesh. The same blueprint was now being executed to take over SIBL.

### THE TAKEOVER

Much of the paperwork related to the takeover was done by Abdur Rahman – not the independent director but a junior officer from the bank's board secretariat – who was picked up from the SIBL office in Motijheel.

Inside the spy office, he was ordered to draft resignation letters, prepare the board minutes, record the "approval" of the chairman, managing director, and executive committee chairman's resignations, and prepare documents for their replacements.

"At the intelligence office, I was asked to write minutes related to the changes in the board," Abdur Rahman, now employed at Bengal Commercial Bank, told The Daily Star.

Eight resolutions were drafted and approved at the DGF office, and Humayun Kabir was forced to sign

last three to four hours ended in just 30 minutes. With chairman Maj (ret'd) Rezaul Haque already removed and sent home along with the MD and the executive committee chairman, SIBL vice-chairman Md Saidur Rahman presided over the board meeting. He did not respond to our calls and text messages.

At the meeting, S Alam introduced himself to the board before the pre-written minutes were tabled, according to six officials and board members present at the meeting.

Documents obtained by The Daily Star show that 36 agendas were originally listed for discussion, but only three were approved and the rest deferred. Under "miscellaneous decisions," however, 14 resolutions were passed at once, all related to resignations and new appointments.

"When almost all agenda of a bank's board are deferred and some important decisions are approved under miscellaneous matters, it can never be considered a normal process. It is undesirable," said Anis A Khan, former chairman of the Association of

board meeting, every director was fully dressed in formal attire, highlighting the extent of the planning, even down to the dress code.

They were eventually released after the meeting but the fear lingered. Within 10 days, seven directors, including Abdur Rahman, resigned.

"After that meeting, we received calls warning us that something bad would happen if we didn't resign," Abdur Rahman told The Daily Star. "Out of fear, we all resigned together."

One source at the Westin told The Daily Star by phone that the hotel room for the board meeting was booked by a DGF official.

**BB'S HASTY APPROVAL**  
Bangladesh Bank walked extra miles to legitimise this forceful takeover.

Abdur Rahman, the SIBL board secretariat officer, was dispatched to the central bank around 5:00pm for approval of the new appointments that took place at the intelligence office. Islami Bank's company secretary JQM Habibullah and two intelligence agency officers accompanied him. Habibullah did not respond to our calls, emails and

the central bank. He resigned after the fall of the Awami League government in August 2024. His phone was found switched off.

In a written response, then BB governor Fazle Kabir told The Daily Star, "At Bangladesh Bank, I always tried to dispose of files on the same day. I would start looking at files after Maghrib prayers and leave the office by 8:00-9:00pm."

He added: "I had no prior knowledge of the approval of SIBL's new directors and MD until the file came to my desk along with the other files."

**S ALAM GRIPS SIBL**  
Soon after the takeover through coercion, regulatory shortcuts, and state intelligence force, the SIBL board was gradually reconstituted with S Alam's loyalists.

Alongside chairman Md Anwarul Azim Arif and vice chairman Belal Ahmed, S Alam's son-in-law, the group's influence deepened with the appointment of S Alam's son, Arshadul Alam, as a director.

But one appointment stood out: Jebunnesa Akbar. She joined the board

Shshanal Alam is chairman. S Alam's nephew Md Mostain Billah Adil is the managing director.

Within just three months of SIBL's forceful takeover, the company with paid-up capital of just Tk 30 crore, received Tk 331 crore in loans from the bank. It also secured letters-of-credit worth Tk 127 crore. Before SIBL's merger in 2025, the company's outstanding liability at the bank stood at Tk 815 crore, documents show.

Infinita is only one example.

Analysis of loan and share purchase records shows a tightly connected network of 47 entities, controlled by 36 individuals, acquired 37.10% of SIBL shares across 14 companies in 2017. Then, between 2018 and 2024, they extracted over Tk 7,615 crore in loans through 33 companies linked by overlapping directors and cross-ownership.

The lending pattern shows how a significant portion of SIBL's assets was channelled into a family and business network, underscoring how control of the bank translated directly into concentrated financial benefit.

At the centre of the network were seven individuals, including S Alam, his two brothers, and his wife, each simultaneously serving as a director in both the share-acquiring entities and the loan-receiving companies.

Anwarul Azim Arif, who was appointed chairman after the takeover, disconnected our call, did not respond to follow-ups, and ignored WhatsApp messages.

The Daily Star also went to meet him at his residence on Abdul Latif Road in Chattogram in October 2025. At the gate, the guard said, "Sir is not home." He died in March 2026.

S Alam's son-in-law Belal Ahmed, who was appointed vice chairman, is believed to be abroad. His phone is switched off, and he did not reply to our messages.

Kazi Osman Ali, who was made MD, said briefly over the phone, "I am unwell," and declined to comment further.

But those picked up and taken to the DGF office said that the day's operations revolved around one man: S Alam, a feared figure during the 2009-2024 Awami League rule because of his ties with Sheikh Hasina and her family.

They described him as the "main actor," sitting inside the intelligence office and directing the entire takeover as though he were one of the agency's top officers.

"Before going to Westin, S Alam warned me not to say anything to the media," said Humayun Kabir, the then SIBL company secretary who was picked from his Uttara home. He added, "One officer grabbed my hand and placed it on the pistol at his waist."

S Alam is believed to be in Singapore, where he is a citizen. He did not respond to our WhatsApp calls and text messages. His lawyers, both local and international, also did not reply to our queries via email and WhatsApp seeking an explanation as to why their client engaged the country's military intelligence agency to take over a bank.

Mustafa K Mujeri, executive director at the Institute for Inclusive Finance and Development (InM) described the entire operation as a rare incident.

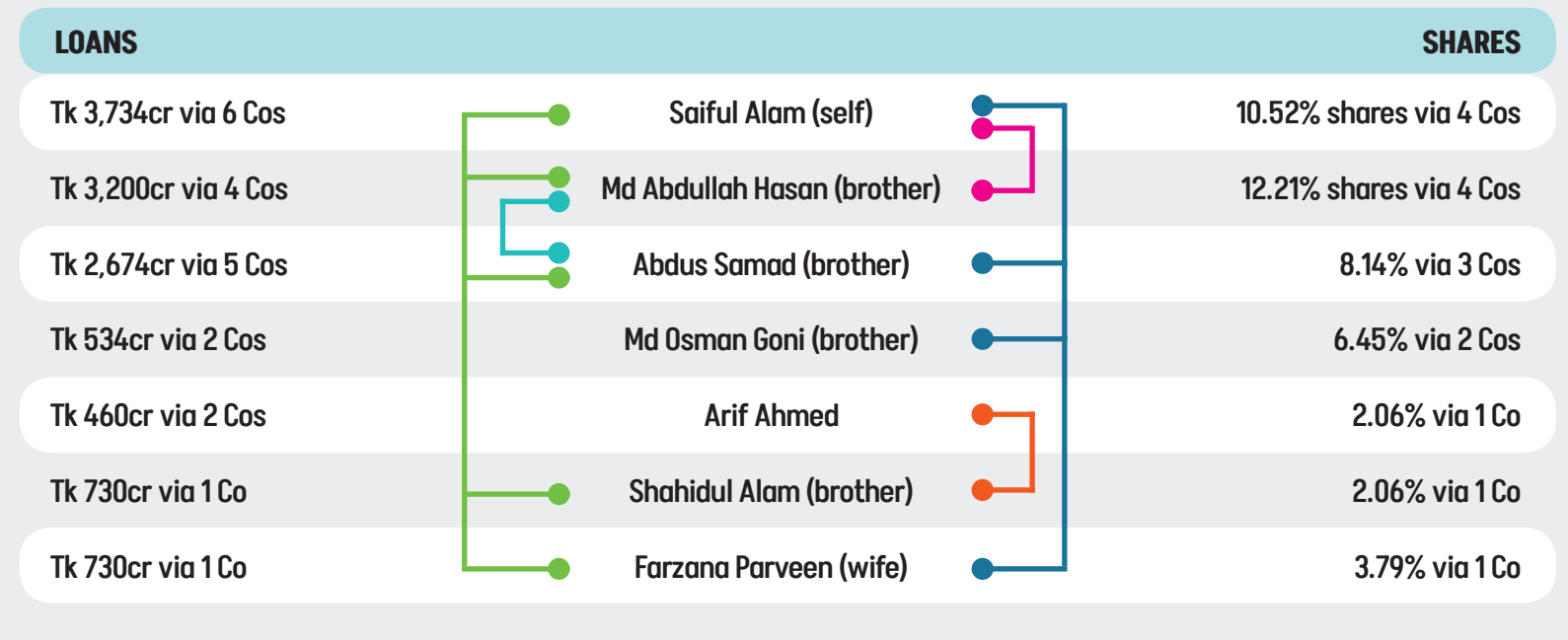
"In many cases, one business group may take control of another business entity, but involving a state security or military agency in forcibly taking over a bank is highly unusual and unjustifiable.

"Those involved should be held accountable so that no government agency, military institution, individual, or business group can engage in similar venture in the future," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

## LOAN AND SHARE DISTRIBUTION

7 shared directors on both sides of the table

The same names sat on boards that bought shares and took loans.



them. These included the resignations of the chairman, managing director, and executive committee chairman, as well as their replacements and the transfer of the company secretary himself.

Prof Md Anwarul Azim Arif, former vice-chancellor of Chittagong University, was installed as chairman in place of Maj (ret'd) Rezaul.

Belal Ahmed, S Alam's son-in-law, replaced executive committee chairman Md Anisul Haque. Kazi Osman Ali, then additional managing director of First Security Islami Bank, was appointed the new MD.

Humayun Kabir was pushed aside and replaced by Abdur Hannan Khan, who previously served as company secretary at Al-Arafah, Union, and First Security banks.

Hannan Khan told The Daily Star, "Abdus Samad Labu [S Alam's brother] told me to go to that office. I agreed out of fear. I thought I might lose my job or promotion if I refused."

**HERE FORMALITIES AT WESTIN**  
The board meeting, by now shifted from the bank's head office in Motijheel to Westin Hotel, began around 2:35pm. In reality, it was a mere formality.

A meeting that would normally

Bankers, Bangladesh, a forum of chief executives of commercial banks.

He noted that since the 14 approved items involved new appointments and approvals of resignations, it clearly indicates that this was a political decision and a major shortcoming in good governance.

"Such a lack of corporate governance is one of the reasons many banks are facing a grim situation today," said



Anis, also former MD and CEO of Mutual Trust Bank.

None of the directors taken to the DGF office that morning was dressed for a board meeting; all were wearing casual clothes fit for home. Yet, within hours, suits, shirts, ties, belts, socks, and shoes of various sizes appeared seemingly out of nowhere. Before being taken to the Westin for text

messages.

At the time, Governor Fazle Kabir was in a meeting at the finance ministry. According to Abdur Rahman, an intelligence officer asked the governor's personal secretary to "call the governor and tell him that I've come on instructions from the Prime Minister's Office." The governor arrived shortly after.

Under normal procedure, Bangladesh Bank's Banking Regulation and Policy Department (BRPD) verifies appointments – checking CIB reports, pending cases, and complaints – a process that typically takes at least a week, often longer. That evening, the process was complete in hours, and by 9:00pm, the BB approved the appointment of SIBL's new chairman, executive committee chairman, and managing director.

The Daily Star has obtained two approval letters, one confirming Anwarul Azim Arif as chairman and the other confirming Belal Ahmed as director.

That night, a BRPD team led by Abu Farah Md Naser stayed back after regular office hours to process the approvals. Naser later became deputy governor and then banking adviser at