

Off the Cuff

Annisul Huq as initiator of Shilpir Pashe Foundation



The get-together at Annisul Huq's house

By the summer of 2016 Lucky Akhand's health had deteriorated to an extent that it became publicly known that his chance of surviving the relapse of cancer was impossible. The disease spread all across his body and his vital organs. He was admitted to the IPGMR Hospitals' Palliative Care Ward and given that

he was a freedom fighter - Ministers, MP's and Annisul Huq ensured that Lucky Bhai's stay and treatment was free.

It was a relief for Lucky Bhai. He now had a place to rest and recuperate to functional levels in what turned out to be the last months of his life. He could also get to meet legions of fans and well-wishers who would come and cheer him up. But the see-saw in his health continued. He would recover well enough and would start singing and composing, leaving his indomitable spirit tired, and have yet another relapse.

Against these backdrops, a contentious issue had cropped up. There were plans by dozens of sometimes well-meaning people at home and abroad to hold concerts and other fund raising initiatives. However to protect his dignity, Lucky Bhai and the core team supervising matters enforced a ban on such concerts for fears that they will be taken over by unscrupulous elements.

For instance in July of 2016 while on a tour of the United States with my band, I received an urgent call from Ershadul Haque Tinku of the core team in Dhaka on orders from Annisul Huq, asking my intervention to put a stop to such shows in the USA. They were being

organized without Lucky Bhai's consent with badly worded and demeaning posters circulating in social media with titles such as 'Charity for Lucky' Concert. I sought the help of my sponsor in the US Tanveer Shaheen who forcefully intervened and put a stop to two such concerts planned to be held in New York.

There was another shocking wake-up call for us. Social media was questioning the core group's efforts and debates raged on "Why raise such a lot of money when Lucky Bhai is unlikely to survive? Who will get the money?" It was like a bolt from the blue, and realizing the gravity of the situation, on 21 October 2016, Annisul Huq called a meeting and dinner at his residence. Musicians from BAMBA, solo singers and others associated with the music industry were in attendance. We were around 30 strong with everyone supporting suggestions for an open air concert to raise money for Lucky Bhai. There were problems though. The weather was too hot and the concert season was months away, also getting a suitable venue was another headache to be dealt with. The other vital aspect was: will the money raised be sufficient?

The meeting became embarrassingly acrimonious as we were stuck with micro issues and soon enough Annisul Huq had to contend with enormous egos of some 'stars'

and 'superstars'! Most unexpected was the utterance of a very famous solo singer whose career took off singing songs composed by Lucky Bhai, who demanded to know very rudely, why "Lucky Bhai needs such a lot of money when he has enough landed property to take care of himself and his family?" We were stunned!

Ershadul Haque Tinku was well prepared and came out with an official document listing Lucky Bhai's finances as well as property. It was the testament of a struggling artist who was financially insolvent and in his dying days sold out most of his property. Annisul Huq looked hurt and made an emotional soliloquy:

"Chances of saving Lucky Bhai's life are now dim and all we can do is pray to Allah for some miracle. However, what about his family and little children? How will they survive? In an industry where you are all deprived of your due share of royalty, if the bread winner of a family, who has made unsurpassed contribution to music dies, can his family who are the beneficiary of his works be meted such a cruel fate when we are around? Come on ladies and gentlemen we can make a difference - we can do things for our own kin, we can help Lucky Bhai and others who are facing similar misfortune. It's not just the government; we the artist too have a huge responsibility to shoulder."

Silence of a most deafening kind prevailed and our 'superstar singer' quickly exited the room only to return for dinner. As I had expected, the meeting ended inconclusively and I told Annisul Huq before leaving that we simply do not have the time for a concert and need to look for 'other alternatives' to raise funds. He looked pained and said "Mac, when will Bangladeshi musicians and singers ever unite?" I had no ready answer then and I surely have no answer today!

On 19 November 2016, less than a month after our meeting Annisul Huq made the announcement of forming Shilpir Pashe Foundation (SPF) with trustees comprising eminent members of the civil society, philanthropists, senior musicians and artist, journalists, cultural luminaries and bankers, most of whom were his close personal friends.

At the packed launching ceremony of SPF at the Westin Hotel, Annisul Huq announced that through his personal efforts and those of others, they have managed to mobilize and collect in cash and commitments the staggering amount of Taka 2.75 crore! The money, henceforth, to be used only for financial assistance to ailing, aging or insolvent artists. "No longer are we interested to hear the expression dushto shilpi or impoverished artists; in fact, we will resist this ignominy

regularly meted to our artist – because for the first time in our history we have got us," said Annisul Huq in his speech which ended in resounding applause. He also made a strong plea for unity.

In the ceremony, cheques of Taka 40 lakh, 20 lakh and 12 lakh were handed over respectively to the ailing Lucky Akhand, Alauddin Ali and Shammi Akhter. Since then, SPF has provided financial assistance to 42 ailing artists or their dependents. For financially insolvent artists, monthly support of up to five years is also being provided. The balance of Taka 1 crore plus has been put in a fixed deposit for ensuring protection and aid to artists in the future.

The moving moment of the event was Lucky Akhand in wheelchair and his band Happy Touch singing his famous 'Ei jaala ar praney shoi na' where hundreds sang in unison. I recorded a live Facebook video available on this link <https://tinyurl.com/y9trj4wb>, that captures the raw emotions of the evening - this being the last public performance by the legend.

Annisul Huq was a man of multiple talents. Whether it be business or politics or entertainment - he was a cut above the rest. But as a musician I have never failed to appreciate his love for music and musicians. Yet, it was

only during a crisis when the chips were down and the going got tough – he excelled and led by examples. The health of Lucky Bhai and how to help him and other ailing and struggling artists always figured in his compassionate plans and if there is at all a musical legacy he has left behind for other do-gooders to follow as an example, the Shilpir Pashe Foundation was a foundational work of charity that will never go unnoticed.

Maqsoodul Haque (Mac) is a radical columnist and a jazz-rock fusion musician.