



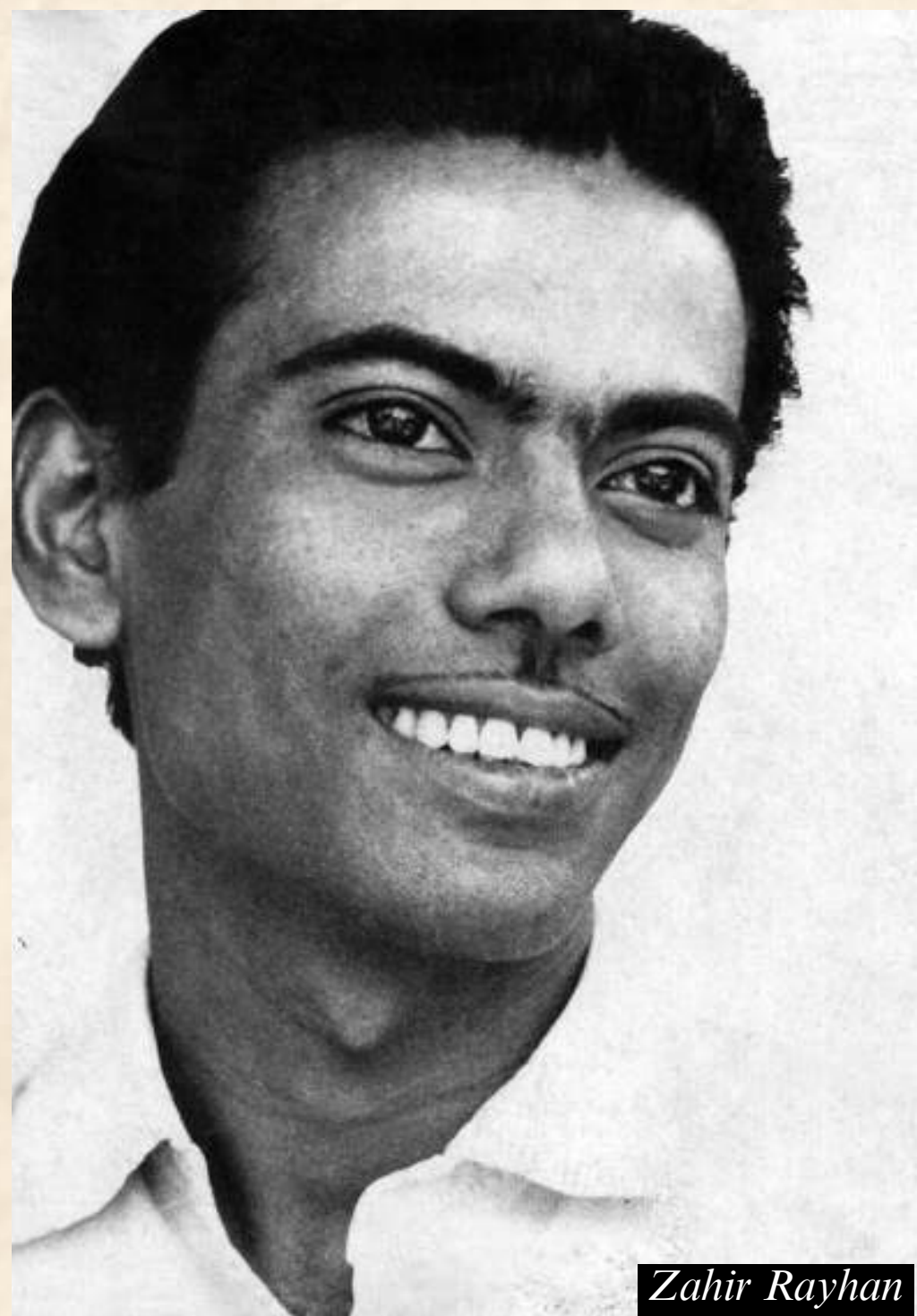
*Zahir Raihan: A Bright Star Lost
Too Soon*

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Zahir Raihan: A Bright Star Lost Too Soon

The phone rang from a corner of the room. Zahir got up from his wooden chair, walked across the room, and picked up the phone. "Hello?" Zahir's voice was curious. "Hello, Zahir," began the unfamiliar voice. The person didn't feel the need to introduce himself, which increased Zahir's suspicion. But the next words from the stranger left him stunned. After the call ended, Zahir put down the phone, his mind blank. Tears welled up in his eyes. He took his coat and left the house. Little did Zahir know, he would never return through that door again.



Zahir Rayhan

Mohammad Zahirullah was born on August 19, 1935, in Majupur village, Feni district. His formal education began in 1940 when he was admitted to Kolkata Model School. After completing his first and second grades, he was enrolled at Mitra Institution. Shortly after the Partition, his family returned to their village. Zahir passed his matriculation exam from the local Amirabad School in 1950 with first division and got admitted to Dhaka College.

Zahir Raihan, then an intermediate student at Dhaka College, was among the ten students who first broke the Section 144 law during the February 21, 1952, protest demanding Bengali as the state language.

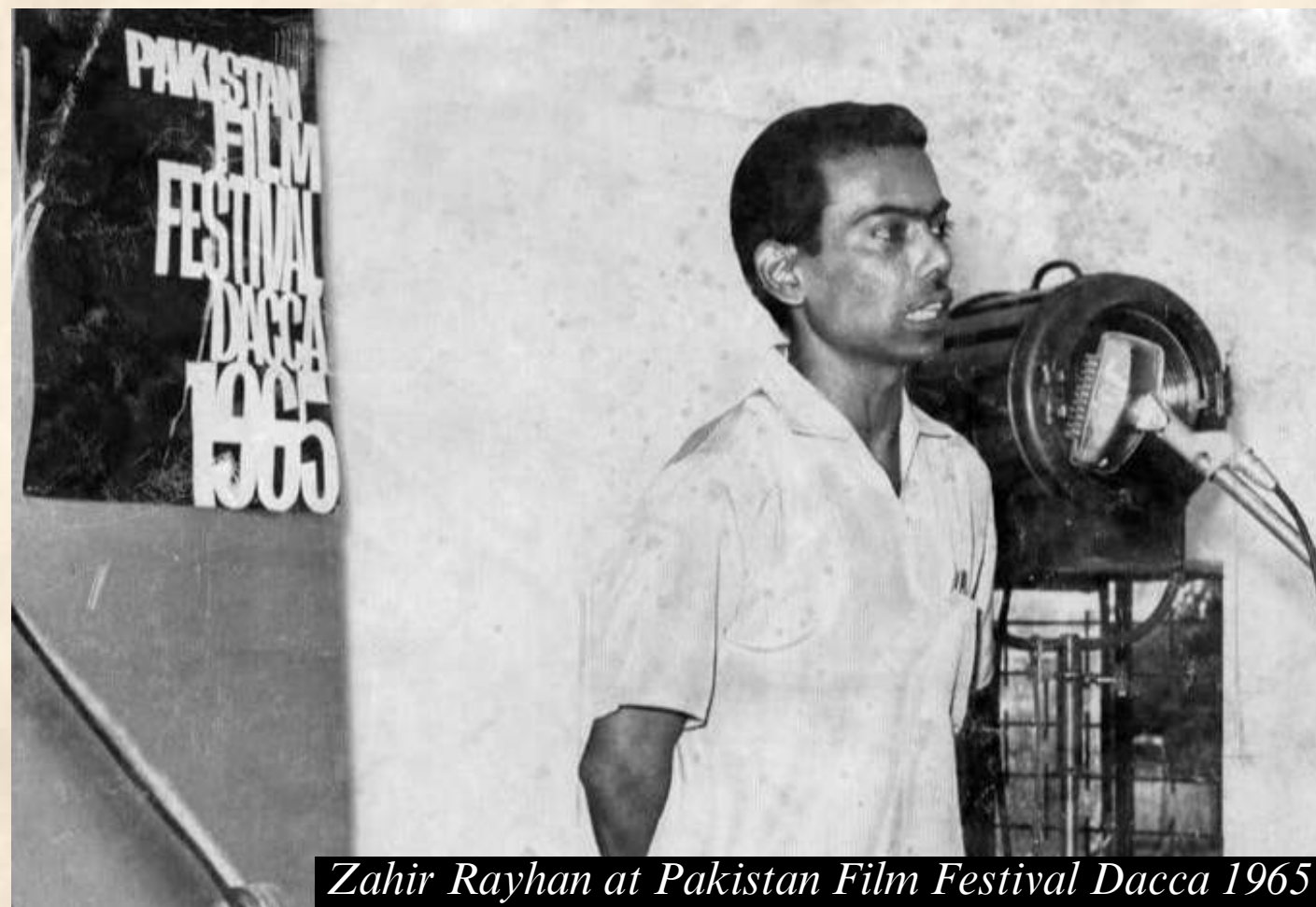
While studying in the fifth grade at the renowned Mitra Institution in Kolkata, Zahir came under the influence of his elder brother, Shahidullah Kaiser, and had his first exposure to politics. Shahidullah Kaiser was a student leader in Kolkata, openly affiliated with the Student Federation and secretly with the Communist Party. Zahir Raihan served as a party courier at the time.

He carried letters and messages between the party's underground members and sold the Communist Party's mouthpiece, *Swadhinata Patrika*. The name 'Zahir Raihan' is closely tied to Comrade Moni Singh, the general secretary of the East Pakistan Communist Party. In 1953, while studying at Dhaka College, Zahirullah joined the Communist Party, influenced by



Zahir Rayhan in his younger days

elder brother, Shahidullah Kaiser. The Communist Party assigned a unique name to each of its members, and Comrade Moni Singh named Zahirullah "*Raihan*." From then on, Mohammad Zahirullah became known and immortalized as "*Zahir Raihan*."



Zahir Rayhan at Pakistan Film Festival Dacca 1965

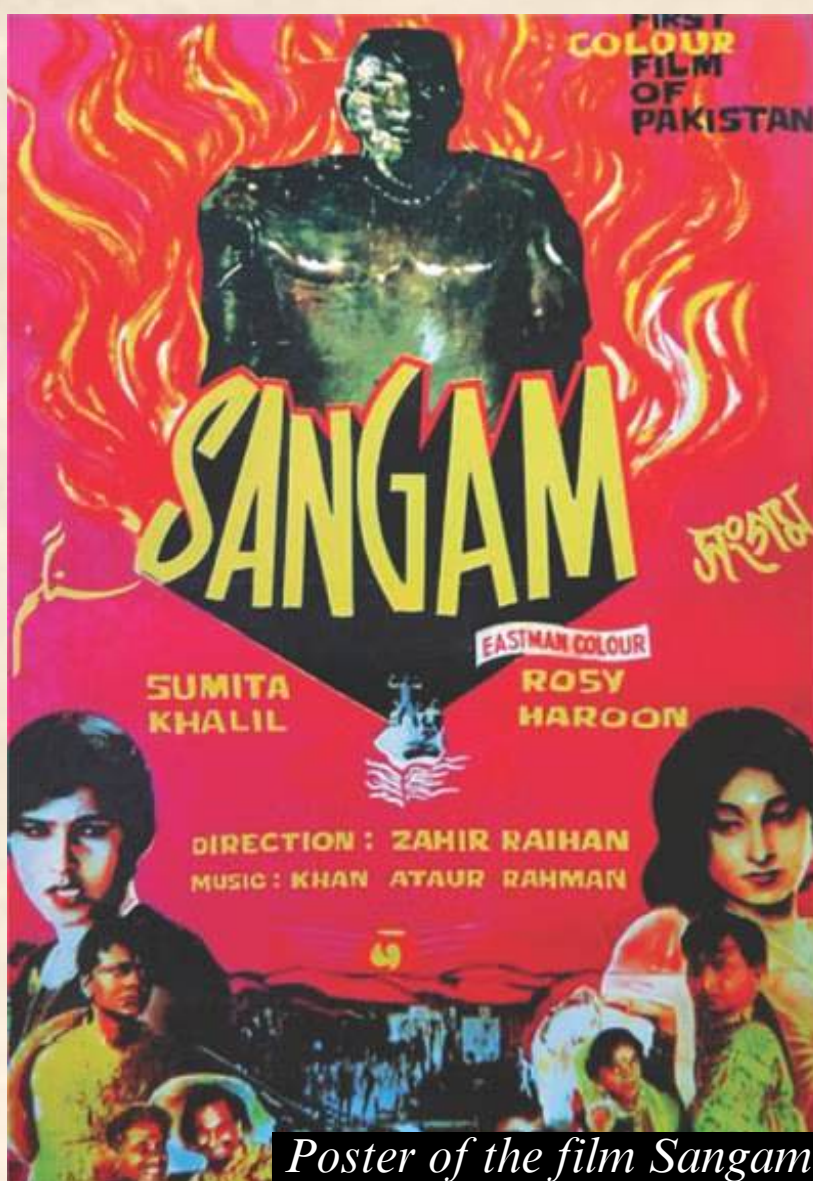
Zahir later enrolled in the Department of Bengali at Dhaka University. There, he began his career as a journalist at the *Juger Alo* newspaper in 1950. He also worked at other publications during his university days, including *Khapchara*, *Yantrik*, and *Cinema*. In 1956, he joined the *Prabaho* newspaper as an editor. That same year, his first short story collection, *Surjogrohon*, was published.

Zahir Raihan carved out a distinct space in Bengali literature. His literary style was extraordinary, and the emotional depth in his writings is rare in Bengali literature. His originality in writing remains unmatched by any contemporary writers in the country. His famous novels *Hajar Bochor Dhore* and *Arek Falgun* demonstrate his unique voice. The final lines from these novels—"Night is falling, the night of a thousand years" from *Hajar Bochor Dhore*, and "In the coming spring, we will be twice as strong" from *Arek Falgun* showcase his distinct style. Among his novels, only *Hajar Bochor Dhore* is set in a rural background, while the others are centered on urban life. *Hajar Bochor Dhore* stands out for its realistic portrayal of rural life.

Zahir Raihan entered the world of film in 1957 as an assistant director for the film *Jago Hua Savera*. The film was directed by Akhtar Jung Kardar. Zahir Raihan made his directorial debut in 1961 with the film *Kokhono Asheni*, starring Khan Ataur Rahman, Shabnam, and Sumita Devi. The same year, Zahir Raihan married Sumita Devi. In 1960, his first novel, *Shesh Bikel er Meye*, was published. The following year, he directed *Sonar Kajol*. However, Zahir Raihan became a prominent figure with his 1963 release *Kancher Deyal*. The film won the Best Film award at the *1965 Pakistan Film Festival*, and Zahir Raihan received the *Best Director award*.



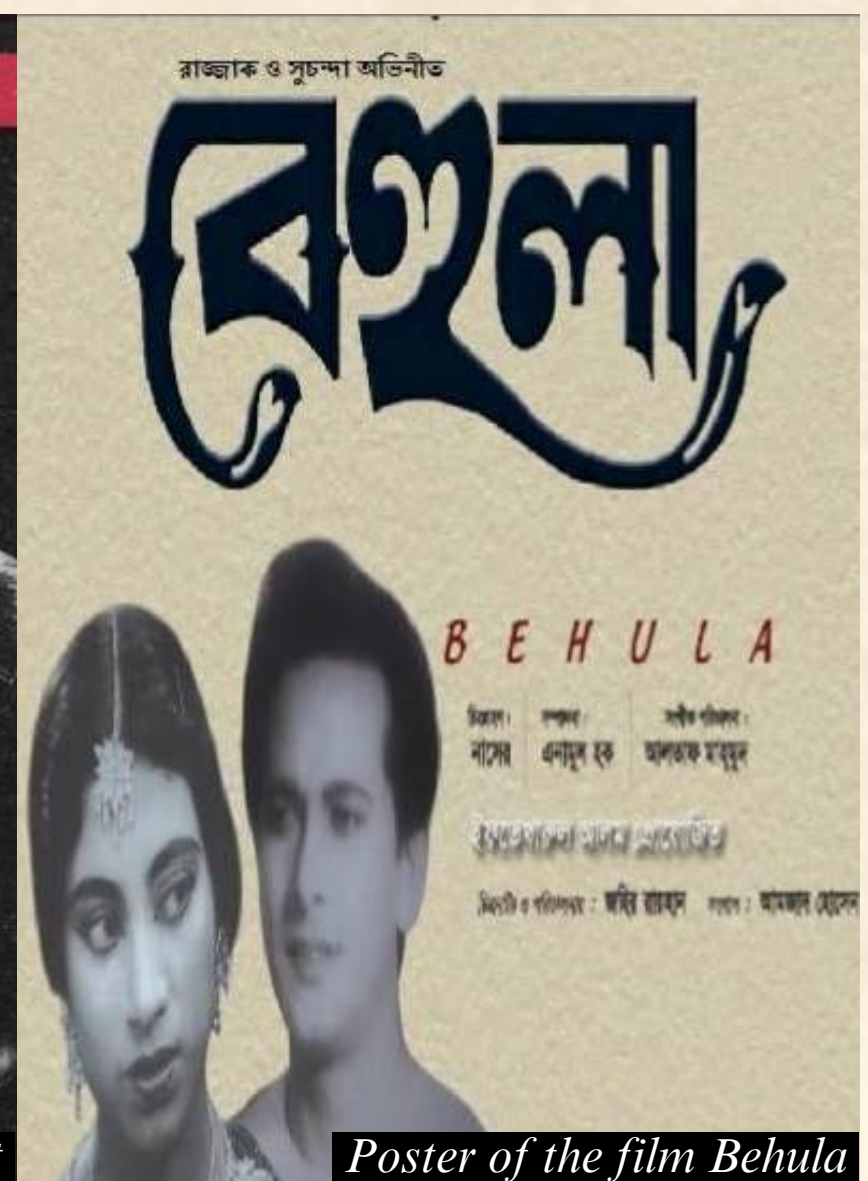
Zahir with his accolades



Poster of the film Sangam



Poster of the film Let there be light



Poster of the film Behula

Zahir Raihan was also the pioneer of color films in Pakistan. His Urdu film *Sangam*, released in 1964, was Pakistan's first color film. All six songs from the film became immensely popular. That year was significant for Zahir Raihan, as his timeless novel *Hajar Bochor Dhore* was also published.

He won the *Adamjee Literary Award* for the novel in 1964. He continued to direct several notable films, including *Ekushey February*, *Bahanna*, *Behula*, and *Anowara*. In 1969, inspired by the blood-soaked events of the 1952 Language Movement, he wrote the famous novel *Arek Falgun*, followed by another celebrated work, *Borof Gola Nodi*.



Zahir Rayhan receiving an award

In 1970, he released one of the most significant films in Bengali cinema history, *Jibon Theke Neya*. This film, regarded as Zahir Raihan's masterpiece, used symbolism to depict the Bengali independence movement. He even included authentic footage of the 1969 mass uprising in the film, which he captured by following rallies with a camera for days. The inclusion of the 21st February procession footage was a bold political statement. That year, he also directed another exceptional film, *Taka Ana Pai*. In the same year, he started filming *Let There Be Light*, a film without a script, with dialogues created on the spot by Zahir Raihan. However, the outbreak of the Liberation War halted its production.



Zahir Rayhan on the set of the film *Kokhono Asheni*

When the Pakistani army launched a massacre on March 25, 1971, Zahir Raihan left Dhaka to join the war, first traveling to Agartala and then Kolkata. There, he focused on organizing propaganda efforts. While doing this work, he faced opposition from some members of the Provisional Government of Bangladesh.

Even while making *Stop Genocide*, he encountered obstacles. The first screening of *Stop Genocide* was held at an undisclosed location, attended by the interim President of Provisional Government of Bangladesh, Syed Nazrul Islam, Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad, and other cabinet members of the Mujibnagar government. Some Awami League leaders requested the West Bengal Censor Board not to approve the film. It began with a Lenin quote and ended with a communist song, *Jago Jago Sarbahara*. Since the Awami League leadership was still hoping for American

support, the film's strong anti-imperialist message was controversial. One leader even threatened to fast in front of the Bangladesh Mission if the film was released. When the West Bengal Censor Board refused to approve the film, Zahir Raihan had to appeal to Delhi.

After Bangladesh gained independence, Zahir Raihan returned to Dhaka from India on December 17, 1971. Before his return, he learned that his elder brother, Shahidullah Kaiser, had been abducted by the Al-Badr forces. On January 30, 1972, Zahir Raihan received a phone call from an unknown person named Rafique saying that his brother was imprisoned in Mirpur and that only Zahir could save him. He immediately headed to Mirpur with his younger brother Zakaria Habib, cousin Shahriar Kabir, brother-in-law Babul, and a few others. However, upon reaching the Mirpur 2 area, Zahir was asked to stay behind with his Toyota car for safety, while the others were sent back. Zahir Raihan joined the military and police convoy to Mirpur 12 in search of the missing intellectuals. At around 9:30 AM, Biharis opened fire on the convoy, killing 42 soldiers. Among the casualties were Captain Morshed and Naik Amir. Except for a few bodies, most of the dead were never found. Zahir Raihan, who had gone in search of his brother, also disappeared during the attack. The next day, when Mirpur was liberated, his body was never found.

By the age of just 36, Zahir Raihan had established himself as one of Bangladesh's most significant and influential literary figures and filmmakers. His films, which are profoundly expressive and rooted in the realities of life, remain memorable to this day for their aesthetic and technical excellence, continuing to inspire both current and future filmmakers. Similarly, with only eight novels, he earned the status of a highly important writer in Bengali literature. Although he was set to walk on a path of great influence in both literature and cinema for *Hajar bochor dhore* ("*A Thousand Years Hence*"), Zahir Raihan tragically disappeared in 1972 amidst the *Borof gola nodi* ("*River of melting ice*") and never returned.

Zahir Raihan symbolizes rebellion and inspiration. He became the voice of protest against injustice, inhumanity, tyranny, corruption, social dominance, and inequality. His spirit returned during the student and people's uprising of 2024. In the voices of thousands of revolutionaries, his words echoed: "*In the coming spring, we will double in number.*" True to the promise of not betraying the blood of our martyred brothers and sisters, before spring arrived, we doubled our strength in the rains of Srabon!



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