COVER STORY

Future of Bangladeshi web series

Recently, the entertainment industry is buzzing about censorship of web content. Based on the talk of the town, The Daily Star - Star Showbiz held an Uncensored with Rafi Hossain live episode on "Future of Bangladeshi web series." The guests for the episode were Amitabh Reza Chowdhury, Piplu R Khan, Nurul Alam Atique, Abu Shahed Emon, Shameem Akhtar, S A Haque Olike, Shahiduzzaman Selim, Masum Reza, Animesh Aich and Bonna Mirza. In this interview with Rafi Hossain, the versatile panel brought forward the importance of using web platforms and what they hope for the future of the industry.

AMITABH REZA CHOWDHURY

"In these current times, I find it hard to make projects where I can fully express my emotions and not get criticised by people. I am honestly scared to make movies or web series at times because I know that if I make something that people might find even a little indecent, I would be putting my life at risk. I have even seen that some people take small out-of-context clips from a web series and spread it around. This really hurts me to see people do this. If you do not like something, then give constructive criticism regarding why you are against it instead of sending threats. There are examples of many great films which cannot be released because people spread around out-of-context clips from it and everyone started to call it vulgar. Regarding web series and the platforms where they are released, I must point out that they are not audience based. Cinemas or television are audience media, but the streaming platforms have users. There is a huge difference in the psychology of an audience and a user in my opinion. The producers in this new medium has also changed a lot. The people who subscribe to these platforms become the producer as they pay to subscribe. We must also make sure that the people running these platforms know about what they are doing. If they are just people who want to make money in whatever way possible, it will cause more harm for us. This is a completely different medium from what we are used to. The mentality, the way it works, the business side, it is all different from the film or television industry."

Ridwan Intisaar Mahbub

PIPLU R KHAN

"The pandemic provided us with a great opportunity to come forward with constructive solutions, rather than concentrating on the minor issues. I believe that this discussion regarding the future of web series has the perfect timeliness value because it sheds light on the forthcoming post-pandemic situation of arts and culture. We are heading towards a new normal and now is the time to adapt to the changes and find internal and external ways to overcome the challenges. So, keeping the future in mind, there is hope for better, at the same time threat for the industry if we cannot make use of the proper methods. For fifty years now, our culture has held onto a glorious past where artists have given us remarkable work of art. But, what we fail to realise is that times have changed; we no longer have that glory. We have become a minority within ourselves because whenever we try to express our viewpoints, we have an apologetic approach to each other. I feel that we have an issue of proximity not only among ourselves but also with those who create policies for our industry. We have a generation who is growing up with practices of internet and technology. Our focus right now should be on what we can offer for them in regards to theatre, television and cinema in our country. I feel that we need a

complete rebuilder and reformed structure in our industry. We should be allowed to function with our contemporary style of work, with creative liberty and authorisation. It's high time we should unite to save ourselves and not let others decide the future of our industry."

Star Showbiz Desk

NURUL ALAM ATIQUE

"In the television industry, there is a huge crisis going on as there is a shortage of stories. All the stories that are made revolve around the same conventional idea. If we try to be too progressive and maintain too much vulgarity in our web series, we might be headed to a similar crisis. There are things that people might do at home, but that does not mean we have to show it in our projects. If we just follow industries from other countries and base our projects on their representation of sexuality and obscenity, we will make a very big mistake. We should do our projects keeping in mind what the industry will be like in the future. So, we should not do anything that might damage the industry in any way. After the pandemic is over, we all need to sit and discuss how we can make sure that those who work in the industry can work properly in the future. We are dealing with a completely different kind of medium. The problems we may encounter will be difficult for us to face. We will see a lot of people trying to take advantage and manipulate this medium. There are a lot of people, both in front of and behind the camera. We have never been able to unite and provide a voice for the people. We have been busy with ourselves for so long, but now is time for us to come together and work to save this new medium from anyone who might try to manipulate it."

Ridwan Intisaar Mahbub

ABU SHAHED EMON

"In recent times, due to the unprecedented crisis, audience or viewers have turned to web platforms for entertainment. The rise of different web platforms, new web contents, viewership, and so on has always been a topic of discussion among directors and producers in the industry. However, this pandemic has allowed us to carry forward a focal discussion on the future of Bangladeshi web series. I believe this discussion benefits in bringing forth different viewpoints regarding the scope we have for the enrichment of web contents and how we can reach out to the Bengali speaking masses around the globe post-pandemic. To make that happen, we need an action plan for audiovisual platforms. So, we are ready to tackle the pandemic and post-pandemic crisis. We need to talk about different elements such as cinema halls, OTT platforms and speak up about improvements. We need to talk about the need for education, training and workshops on the concepts of media and technology. We should speak up about government support, tax incentives on film festivals and so on. We have lost our freedom of

expression over time. So, I feel that it is necessary to discuss and carry out a practical guideline keeping all the market changes in mind. We should summarise all our points and let our government know that this is what we want in our industry."

Star Showbiz Desk

SHAMEEM AKHTAR

"The debate about obscenity in movies and who should be in charge of censorship has been ongoing for quite some time now. I believe that it is entirely subjective. Back in our time, despite significant adversity, including that from the mainstream media, people spoke up about this issue. They expressed their opinions and brought it into the light, and created a space for this to be discussed. Nowadays, these matters are not talked about, and we need to figure out why that is. We need to identify our lacking and make changes, and speak up about this matter once again."

Shreya Shomoyeeta

S A HAQUE OLIKE

"Firstly, I have nothing 'for' or 'against' web series. We all are filmmakers and creators with different perspectives with a similar goal. Our aim involves working with web series and taking Bangladeshi web contents to global standards. This is a new platform, a new normal, a new possibility for our industry. There is a lot of scope and hope for our industry to grow in regards to the platforms. However, I am also concerned about how much we will be able to execute and adapt to the new changes. I feel that we need to discuss and talk more on the issues so that we can come up with a concrete plan for execution. I believe today's discussion is just the beginning and we still have to look into the overall scenario of our entertainment industry. I would like to add one point regarding the future of web platforms. The platform *Binge* sent out a letter apologising and acknowledging the concern of their contents. However, there was one line in the letter with which I disagree. They stated filmmakers had their utmost liberty in the making of the web content and they provided the filmmakers with the authorisation to release such obscene contents. So, the entire fault falls on the shoulder of a director. We are all aware of the structure and decision-making processes of any platform, agency or organisation. Before finalising and releasing any content, the director and the team involved with the project goes through several meetings. So, I disagree with the point that the directors are entirely to blame for the release of such content. However, based on this hyped talk of the town, we should now keep our focus on creating a structured guideline to use the web platforms. I feel that everyone present today in this forum should sit for more discussions and plan for the future of web platforms and series."

Star Showbiz Desk

SHAHIDUZZAMAN SELIM

"As an artist, I would have to say that I would never want an avenue of my work to be closed because it does have to do with my financial situation. If people are diverted from television to web platforms, the revenue going to them will stop. Moreover, the creators of these are view-hungry. They want their shows to gain popularity immediately, so they upload it on *YouTube*. In that case, how will they get the revenue for their work? They could have used a platform similar to *Netflix* or *Hoichoi* to ensure that the audience has to contribute to watch it. With the rise of social media like *Facebook* in Bangladesh, it seems that everyone is a critic now. They are exposed to the works of international creators, which they love, but when it comes to the works of our country, they are extremely nit-picky. They blame the creators. But, how is it the creators' fault? They have to work. If they knew that the exposure would be limited to those who contribute, they would work harder and express themselves more. The topic of decency is completely up to the individual. They decide if their work is decent or not. This is true for films, series or paintings. What one will and won't show is entirely personal. I have worked with most of the people we're talking to today, and I have complete faith that they are the ones who will hold web series above anyone who might sully it. There is an apparent solution to this which is taking it to the government and asking them to look into the types of content we would deem inappropriate. However, the government is very likely to ban web series as a whole. We have to make sure this does not happen. "

Amina Hossain

MASUM REZA

"I believe that it's our fault for being unable to present the audience with our views and vision on this matter, for which some people still view nudity as indecency. We often pride ourselves on having modern ideologies and views, but it is also important to convey this to the society itself. Another issue that is being discussed is the revenue. We should not be looking for commercial openings. Nowadays, televisions dramas make the same amount of money, but the amount decreases drastically by the time it gets to the director, rather than the revenue earned. Many people enter the industry with the mindset to make a profit, and that is resulting in these issues. I am ready to give my all to make a good project, but I do not want it to be ruined by profiteering minds. I want to point out that the process through which profits are divided and distributed is often corrupted. Many directors who have created exceptional television dramas and shows are leaving the industry for this reason. We are in charge of writing, creating, and bringing a project

to life. We should not be dealing with the sales and finance section of the process."

Shreya Shomoyeeta

ANIMESH AICH

"In our discussions, we do not just think about what the industry is like now, we also talk about what it will be, say, after fifty years. None of us know what the world will be like then. It is not just that there will be a lot of technological advancement then, we will also have very different stories. We need to be futuristic when making any project and should keep with the current times. There have always been restrictions whenever we make movies or web series, but every day, the restrictions are getting stricter and are being enforced more. I think that all of us directors should appeal to the government and ask for more freedom of speech in our projects. We know what we should not say and what we can say. We all have our own idea of self-censorship, so I think that if our ideas get censored more, that is bad for our projects. I must add that what is decent or indecent is very subjective. We all need to talk about how we can leave a good place for the next generation through our cultural media, and work for it. We also need to take responsibility for the decline of the television industry, and we must make sure that the same thing does not happen to the web platforms. All sorts of constructive criticism are welcome regarding projects, but that criticism must be constructive or warranted. "

Ridwan Intisaar Mahbub

BONNA MIRZA

"The discussion of indecency in media, especially in web series, is quite unnecessary in my opinion because who decides what's decent and what's not? Where is the standard of decency and who creates it? I think that we should concentrate more on how we can use and introduce new and old platforms to display the works of our creative minds in the global market. The apparent indecent material that are coming out do have ratings, so it is ultimately up to the audience to decide what they want to see. If we are to restrict the exposure, we have to also think about how we can do that since everything is out in the open anyways. I believe that we need to ask ourselves if sexuality is inherently obscene and what truly is decent and indecent. If we can answer these, I think we can progress. Web series, at the end of the day, are products, so they should be created, produced and promoted. We need to be able to use this new platform, so that we open a new area of opportunities for the entertainment industry. Finally, I have to say that we must stop pointing fingers at women, be it for their clothes or attitude. Many female actors have been victims of such over the years, and this issue is saddening. We need to move away from this. "

Amina Hossain

IN REMEMBRANCE

Joana Nomrata Mazumder

Leaving behind a plethora of playback classics, a gem of the music industry, Andrew Kishore, will forever be in our hearts. After battling cancer for almost ten months, the 'playback king' bid farewell to us all on July 7, 2020. With a career spanning over four decades, the singer gave voice to fifteen thousand songs and had achieved the 'National Film Award' eight times. His devotion to music and humble nature has always been well noted among his peers and followers. To keep his memory alive, we reminisce twenty iconic songs of Andrew Kishore which will reverberate for generations to come as his legacy.

- Hayre Manush Rongin Phanush
- Amar Buker Moddhekhane
- Amar Babar Mukhe Prothom Jedin Shunechilam Gan
- Amar Gorur Garite
- Tomake Dhekle Mone Hoi
- Porena Chokher Polok
- Premer Shomadhi Bhenge
- Shobai to Bhalobasha Chai
- Amar Sara Deho
- Beder Meye Josna
- Bhalobeshe Gelam Shudhu Bhalobasha Pelam Na
- Shono Go Chad, Shono Tara
- Ami Akdin Tomai Na Dekhile
- Tumi Aaj Kotha Diyecho
- Ami Chirokal Preme Khangal
- Ak Bindhu Bhalobasha Dao
- Ak Chor Jai Chole
- Bhalo Achi Bhalo Theko
- Jiboner Golpo Ache Baki Olpo
- Dak Diyachen Doyal Amare