

In his words: The last conversation with Aly Zaker

Conversing with Aly Zaker has always been a treat. From talking in detail about the early theatre days to his first taste of a liberated Bangladesh—Aly Zaker would become an animated storyteller, mesmerising his audience and listeners with his added footnotes and mischievous smiles. The Daily Star's Elita Karim retrieved a recording from 2018, where Aly Zaker talked about how he became an advertising man. The 15-minute interview turned into an hour-long chat where he reminisced about his days from Kolkata, Karachi and Dhaka. Below is a small part of the interview, minus the infectious guffaws and the beautiful modulation of the storyteller's voice.

I have written my life story from the time that I can remember till early 1971. It was published by Ittadi Prokashoni. The one I am writing is the second part where I talk about my philosophy of life; so much happened after independence—theatre, love, marriage, children. More importantly, my ideas changed. So this will be a very comprehensive document; 30,000 words have been written, I need to write 50,000 more! I am calling it *Modhyanno Oporanmyo*.

I did not complete my Masters, I just did my Honours from Dhaka University. You see, there were many ups and downs in my family. I lost my father, my mother and within a year I lost my eldest sister who was like my mother. Three deaths in my family in a row, and I was devastated. My brother worked in PIA back then. I wanted to leave Dhaka, so he presented me with a one way ticket to Karachi.

I was looking for work and ended up at a UK based advertising agency, where I joined for Rs 400 a month and would write English copies. Eventually, Asiatic, an advertising company in Karachi, offered me a job. A separate company was being formed in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, and I was asked if I wanted to go back home. I grabbed the opportunity immediately! I joined as Senior Client Executive at the age of 24 and this was back in 1967.

I was posted in Dhaka and joined the company called East Asiatic Advertising Limited. I also worked with Enayet Karim and Latifur Rahman back then in Interspan, which later changed to Interspeed. The history of my career has no colour in it, it has been the same—advertising! I know no other trade.

I think I had always had an inclination towards the theatre. My nana (maternal grandfather) had settled down in Kolkata, though he belonged to Comilla. Every summer vacation my mother, my siblings and I would visit him. My father could not go because he was a senior bureaucrat

in the Pakistan government and he was not allowed to go to India.

My mother and I would go watch stage plays and the theatre regularly. The curtains would go up and everything would play out like magic in front of me. I would tell myself that if I ever wanted to act, I would do this. This inspired me to work in this field professionally after Liberation.

I want to share an interesting story with you. I joined Nagorik in 1972. In Kolkata, Mamunur Rashid would occasionally act and participate in the Shwadinh Bangla Betaar Kendra plays. I remember, there was a horrible restaurant nearby which would serve equally horrible food. They would serve a beef dish made from the worst possible pieces—but one plate of it cost around one taka, along with two rutis. This was our regular lunch. One



ALY ZAKER (1944-2020)

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day in November 1971, after eating there, Mamun asked me what my plans were now that the country would be liberated. I said, I will do stage plays. Mamun would not forget this!

In 1972, my older brother and

I rented a flat in Rajarbagh, where Mamun came to visit us one day. He said, "I hope you did not forget what you had told me. I am building a team of stage actors. We want you to act with us as well." I said, sure I will. We were doing Shahid Munier Chowdhury's *Kobor*. I played the role of a Pakistani *neti*, because I was well built. We started to rehearse at Chayaneer, the building where our rented flat was located. I remember, Shubhash Dutta, the famous film director and actor, played the role of the police inspector—the conscious of the play.

Professor Zia Haider from Chittagong University and theatre personality and also my friend, Ataur Rahman, had come to watch the play. Zia bhai had formed Nagorik in 1968, but could not organise any stage play as such. After liberation, he wanted to revive the group and start actual theatre and stage plays.

Immediately after our play got done, they came to see us and asked if I would continue with my acting. I said yes, I would, but I would have to speak to Mamun first. Mamun was fine with it

and that's when I joined Nagorik.

If I have any contribution, this is the contribution that you should write about and I want you to write about this—changing the concept of staging plays in Bangladesh. At a Nagorik meeting, I said that we would need to introduce a process whereby, every evening, a person will have the option of buying a ticket and watching a play, like how it happens in every other major city in the world. Mind you, back then people did buy tickets to watch stage plays, but the plays would be staged on three random days in a year.

The new process would bring about a regularity where staging and watching plays were concerned. Only then could we call ourselves professional actors in a proper industry. Of course we had challenges, but we could take steps to face them. For instance, we would work our way around the budget, spend less, sometimes act without a set, do one-act plays—but we would not stop staging plays, every evening.

Golam Rabbani, one day, shared a book with me called *Baki Itihas* by a young writer from Kolkata, Badal Sarkar. I read it and I was charged—we had to stage this soon! I gave it to Zia bhai and Ataur and they loved it as well. We were organising rehearsals, looking for actors—the preparations had begun. Naila Ehmar Zaman, who is now Dr Naila Khan, had joined us and was playing the role of Bashanti in the play. We had Abul Hayat playing a very powerful role as well. But we needed someone to play the role of Kona Chakrabarty. It was difficult to find young women back then, who would act or work in theatre. It was Naila who told me that she knew a young woman, who was slightly younger than Naila. Her brother, who was lost in the war, used to be a very good actor. Naila wanted to ask the young woman and her parents as well, if she would play the role of Kona Chakrabarty. And that was Sara. She came and did a wonderful job with Kona. Incidentally, we booked the hall at the British

Council for eight Sundays in a row and staged the play at 11:00am in the mornings. The first three shows had between 16-40 people in the audience. The fourth show onwards, we would have a house full every Sunday—all 300 seats! Ticket prices were kept at Tk 3 and Tk 5.

I remember returning to Dhaka the same day Bangabandhu returned, January 9, 1972. I couldn't return on December 16, Victory Day, because I was the programme producer for the English language programme for Shwadinh Bangla Betaar Kendra. My boss Alamgir Kabir asked me to stay on for a while. He said that I would have to hand over the tape recorders and devices to the Indian army and only then could I return home. So that took some time.

The journey back home was fabulous! Very early in the morning at 4:00am, we started from Kolkata by bus, through Jessore. There were 22 men and women on the bus. All the ferries were devastated and bombed by the Pakistani army. So we had to hire boats to reach Aricha Ghat, from where we would take another bus and continue with the journey. We even had to spend a night there. I wrote about it in my memoirs—how the wind and soil from an independent Bangladesh were now a part of me, while I spent the entire night by the river. When I reached Independent Bangladesh, I saw celebrations everywhere. The whole country was rejoicing. I remember roaming about the streets of my country at 2am!

And the conversation continued for a good quarter of an hour, in between sips of tea and snacks. Aly Zaker mentions names of old friends, stories of family members, and of course, loved ones who are now no more. Aly Zaker himself is now no more; however, he will forever be alive through his work. The retrieved recording has turned out to be a gift.

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16 days of activism and our obsession with 'commonsense' violence



ALONG with many other countries in the world, Bangladesh is currently observing the UN system's 16 days of activism against gender-based

violence—an annual international campaign calling individuals and organisations to prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls. While the campaign plays a vital role in mobilising our communities against violence against women and girls, it is also essential to think about gendered violence that does not fall under the purview of the hegemonic way of framing "violence against women and girls" as an interpersonal act stemming from patriarchal cultural norms.

Feminist scholar Elora Chowdhury, who has conducted extensive research on women's organising against gendered violence in Bangladesh, points out the importance of understanding women's oppression beyond the lens of "male violence" and investigating how gendered violence is a product of structural violence. Her book *Transnationalism Reversed: Women Organizing against Gendered Violence in Bangladesh* demonstrates how men throwing acid against women and girls is not just an "aberrant cultural practice" and how it stemmed from a long history of social-economic-political-cultural transition in Bangladesh. The decline in the agriculture-based economy, growth of landlessness and unemployment, migration to urban areas, economic liberalisation programmes with the support of World Bank and IMF, the rising demand for cheap, feminised labour in the manufacturing industry, women's increasing participation in the labour market, changing norms around gender roles and relations, and the rise of under-regulated mechanic, leather, and garment industries making sulfuric and nitric acid readily available—all created an abundant ground for acid violence against women and girls (Chowdhury 2011). Without analysing and addressing the subtext, interventions that solely rely on a "commonsense" understanding of violence—a phrase borrowed from another prominent transnational

feminist scholar Dina Siddiqi (2015)—can only go a limited extent to challenge root causes of gendered violence. It may be harder to pinpoint structural violence at a glance, and instances of structural violence may appear to be isolated from one another. However, a careful investigation can unravel how capitalism, neoliberalism, heterosexism, militarism, imperialism, and other systemic forces continue to promote gendered violence.

This year's United Nations Secretary-General's Campaign UNiTE's main theme is: "Orange the World: Fund, Respect, Prevent, and Collect!" The colour orange symbolises a brighter future free of violence and signifies global solidarity for eliminating all forms of violence. The UN concept note for engagement published in the UN Women website notes that violence against women and girls, and particularly domestic violence, has escalated around the world due to the global Covid-19 pandemic. The UN proposes an umbrella political engagement strategy to unite activists around the world. The advocacy focus for the next year will be: Fund, Prevent, Respond, and Collect.

According to the UN Women website, advocacy on "funding" would prioritise things like providing funding for a minimum package of essential services that include gender-based violence prevention in Covid-19 stimulus packages and making flexible funding available for women's rights organisations working at the nexus of Covid-19 and gender-based violence. "Preventing" would promote the declaration of a national zero-tolerance policy and action addressing gender-based violence. It would support launching a Covid-19 behaviour change social mobilisation programme addressing shifts in social norms, positive masculinities, gender-based violence, and intersecting inequalities. "Responding" would ensure essential support services for survivors of gender-based violence during Covid-19 lockdowns and adequate criminal justice responses. Lastly, "collecting" would include collecting data for improving gender-based violence services and programmes while ensuring the data is ethically collected with informed consent, and the conditions under which the survivors agreed to provide information are carefully considered.

The Covid-19 emergency focus of the UNiTE campaign did a good job of promoting a survivor-centric narrative, prioritising a "do no harm" approach that respects a contextual understanding of informed consent, acknowledging the role of women's movements, inviting multiple sectors to engage in transformative changes, and elevating voices of young feminists. Nevertheless, it is still important to ask what a "Fund, Respect, Prevent, Collect" model can do to address violence against women and girls that is not done in the name of culture or tradition or religion, that is not done by individual patriarchal men, and that is done in



PHOTO: FARIYA RAHMAN BRISHTI

the name of economic empowerment and economic development within a neoliberal framework and perpetuated by multi-layered actors and institutions in transnational circuits of commodities and labour.

For example, how would the UN political engagement strategy help more than 2.3 million Bangladeshi garment workers, most of whom are women and have been affected by more than USD 3.18 billion worth of suspension or cancellation of orders by global retailers due to the global Covid-19 crisis? Will the sufferings of these women garment workers, who work in an industry that capitalises on the extreme exploitation of their cheapened feminised labour, be framed

as "gender-based violence" under the proposed conceptual framework of UN Women? Will these workers be able to secure any funding support as part of this year's UN global political engagement strategy? Will women's rights organisations in Bangladesh run campaigns as part of their 16 days of activism against gender-based violence against the way North American and European buyers arbitrarily sought resort to the force majeure clause and cancelled or suspended orders creating an unprecedented crisis during the Covid-19 pandemic or the way powerful factory owners presented the impossible choice of "dying of hunger versus dying of the virus" (Siddiqi

needed research on women garment workers' experiences or focused on skill development or provided services to women garment workers. Nevertheless, very few moved beyond the charity-based model of providing service and meaningfully engaged in grassroots labour rights movement with women garment workers. How will the simplistic call for lighting and decorating buildings and landmarks in orange by the UN as a key tool for "unifying all activities" as described in the UN concept note for engagement be able to merge the gap between feminist movements and labour rights movements? How will it challenge the way powerful transnational corporations, governments, local suppliers, and oppressive local and global trade and labour laws continue to oppress women workers and perpetuate systemic violence?

Or, will the hyper-focus on local and individual forms of violence of the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence do any good to female migrant workers whose own country failed to offer them livelihood security and "exported" them to the Middle East in exchange for foreign exchange? Will these workers—who were forced to accept withholding or reduction of wages or unjustly deported from their host countries due to the pandemic—get any funding support under "gender-based violence prevention" initiatives? What kind of preventive measures or support services can be expected by women who experienced violence not just by individual men but by their own state, by their employers, by the dysfunctional labour and immigration laws and policies of their host states, by their non-responsive embassy, by *dalals* and recruitment agencies and other transnational syndicates?

It is time to move beyond the individualistic framing of violence against women and girls. It is time to think creatively how we can address everyday gendered precarity that is created and sustained not just by sexist men and oppressive cultural norms but also by the imperialist, capitalist, neoliberal, heteropatriarchal world order and its intersecting violent systems of oppression.

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2020) to women garment workers?

During my Ph.D. fieldwork on transnational labour activism in the Bangladeshi garment industry after the Rana Plaza collapse, one of the prominent Bangladeshi garment labour organisers expressed her frustration saying, "Mainstream women's movement does not talk about our (garment workers') issues. There are divisions between the women's movement and the women workers' movement. Women's rights activists in Bangladesh talk about dowry, domestic violence, or CEDAW ratification. Have you heard them talking about women garment workers' rights?" To be fair, there are a number of Bangladeshi NGOs that conducted much-