

# Bangladeshis: Happiest people in the world?

Shaheen Dill-Riaz's in depth observation



Scenes (top and bottom) from *The Happiest People in the World*

KARIM WAHEED

ACCORDING to a survey by the London School of Economics a few years ago, the happiest people in the world live in Bangladesh. Out of curiosity German writer Sybille Berg travelled to Bangladesh in search of happiness and described her findings in an open letter to the professor of the British survey in the *Zeit Magazine* as "hell".

These contradictory opinions triggered Berlin-based Bangladeshi filmmaker Shaheen Dill-Riaz to make a trip to Dhaka to get the real picture. Dill-Riaz's documentary *Shilpo Shohor Swapnolok: The Happiest People in the World* (a German production) tries to unravel the universal conundrum -- Is anyone truly "happy"?

Dill-Riaz records informal conversations with individuals living in Dhaka -- from different social backgrounds, with distinctly disparate aspirations. The characters are quite colourful and evidently multi-layered. Hassan, a close friend of the filmmaker, is the eternal leftist and film activist whose ideals and hopes were crushed with the disintegration of the former Soviet Union. Russell, now a teenager, has had his 15 minutes of fame when his performance as Rokon was highly acclaimed in Tarque Masud's

film *Matir Moina*. Living in a shanty with his family, Russel makes his living as a rickshaw puller. Jaded at an early age by the harsh surroundings, Russel has not given up hope of becoming a professional actor.

Kutti, a former domestic help, now works in a textile factory. Cramped up in a single room with four roommates, Kutti does not want to get married. She is trying to save money; her dream -- setting up a small grocery store of her own. Milli, Dill Riaz's aunt, is a well-off middle-aged woman balancing her time between London and Dhaka. She is the only character in the film who is seemingly happy but beneath that bright and breezy veneer is a woman exploited and let down by her near and dear ones.

These characters open up as the film moves ahead, from their conversations certain aspects of our society become apparent: individuals from middle-class families are still expected to go with mundane nine to five jobs and not encouraged to take up challenging professions like documentary or alternative filmmaking which has no commercial prospect in our country, people often take the underprivileged for granted -- rickshaw pullers cannot do much even if they are underpaid and neither can domestic help or workers in the garments indus-

try, women face exploitation and abuse in all classes of the society -- the methods may vary.

Unintentional dramatic developments like a death, gives the film a certain touch that is characteristic in the docu-fiction genre. Dill-Riaz does not offer the audience a sermon or an opinion on a platter. "Happiness" will still be elusive once you're done watching the film. The differences between "being happy" and "being content" are often misread and there is no "heaven" or "hell" on earth.

Quality of sound editing is perhaps the most noticeable technical aspect of the film. According to Dill-Riaz, it took the talented team of Md Abdus Sattar, Ripon Nath and Michael Andreas in charge of sound recording and mixing, months to wrap up the work.

The film has been screened at international festivals including Film Fest Hamburg 2005 (Hamburg, Germany), Festival do Rio 2005 (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), Film South Asia 2005 (Kathmandu, Nepal), Les Recontres Internationales des Documentaires du Montreal 2005 (Montreal, Canada), Dhaka International Film Festival 2005 (Dhaka, Bangladesh), Independent Film Festival Rome 2005 (Rome, Italy) and Beeld Voor Beeld Film Festival 2006 (Amsterdam, Netherlands).

Dill-Riaz's previous documentary -- *Jibon Jole-Bele / Sand and Water* (jointly produced by RBB and HFF-Film School) illustrates the struggle for existence of people living in the Jamuna char areas -- was highly acclaimed at international festivals as well. His latest project *Ireneaters* (a French-German-Belgian production) brings to light ship-breakers working at the docks in Bangladesh. The film is yet to be released.



## Tête-à-tête

# "I have always been an introvert and been on my own" -- Ankhi Alamgir

MAHMUDA AFROZ

Once upon a time when people heard the name Ankhi Alamgir, they immediately associated her with famous actor Alamgir. Being born into a famous actor's family has had its ups and downs, admits *adunik* singer Ankhi. But things have changed since then and today Ankhi has carved a niche for herself in the entertainment world. In an exclusive interview with *The Daily Star* she talks about the journey to her current position.

"I have always been an introvert and been on my own. Somehow as a child everyone would want to be friends with me because I was Alamgir's daughter and not because I was Ankhi. So I never had close friends." While some of her teachers adored her, others used to pass taunting comments like -- "Oh why study, you are Alamgir's daughter."

"However, my parents have always instilled the value of education. I passed out from Shaheen School and College with distinction and completed my LLB from Queen's University. However, everyone still thought I would end up being an actor like my father."

Ankhi could have simply been an actor as well. She won a National Award in the children's category for Amjad Hussain's movie *Bhat De*. "My parents didn't want me to work in films at that young age. They realised that if I joined the acting world at that point, I wouldn't complete my education. I also figured out that singing suited me better. With my singing career I got the full package -- completed my studies, had a happy family life and am doing something I love."

Ankhi has been learning classical music since second grade. "My first teacher was Ustad Akhtar Sadmani. Subse-



quently, I trained under Sanjiv De." She rendered her first song in the movie *Bidrohi Bau* in 1994 and then her album *Pratham Koli* came out. Both were huge hits amongst the masses.

After tasting success, Ankhi had to decide what she wanted more in life. Prioritising became important. "Earlier in life I had no ambition to be a professional

singer; rather I had wanted to be a lawyer. However after the success of my album I realised I didn't want to study any more. I must admit I started enjoying the name, fame and money."

"I did have an advantage being Alamgir's daughter during the initial days. Everyone already knew me and so I didn't have a tough time being recognised

amongst the masses. For those who have no media background the launching pad can be difficult. Gaining recognition can prove to be a tough hurdle. But at the end one has to prove oneself. Someone else's name won't make you a star."

In Ankhi's life her parents have been her greatest inspiration. "One thing they were both firm about was instilling moral values in us." Her dad is also her biggest critic. "If my song has a minute mistake he will immediately point that out. He does the same with my make-up, my attire and so on. He just wants me to be perfect. On the contrary, my mother is the opposite. For her, her daughter is always perfect."

Ankhi describes herself as a very moody and self-willed person. While her parents were worried initially, she told them that if she ever disappointed them then they could stop her. But they soon realised she did everything expected of her, but at her own pace and mood. "This streak of moodiness has been there always. I got married and had two children at the peak of my career. Everyone said my popularity would diminish. But I went ahead. However I don't do things that would affect others negatively."

Great at stage performances, Ankhi does plenty of shows abroad and in the country. She has just returned from Paris. With two young daughters she still manages to look young, energetic and fabulous. "My mom helps me out with the children. Besides that I have always felt that one should maintain oneself."

To be a real artiste, one has to be a good human being, believes Ankhi. "Learning classical music is necessary. But to sustain your popularity you have to know how to give in return all the love and affection you receive."

## Four-day classical dance and instrumental recitals end at Shilpakala

ERSHAD KAMOL

Leading instrumentalists of Bangladesh presented classical recitals on the last two days of the four-day programme featuring classical dance and instrumental music, which ended on February 1. The programme, arranged by Department of Production at the National Theatre Stage,



AFM Ekram Hossain (R) on *esraj* with Syed Meher Hossain on the tabla

gave the audience a rare chance to get a glimpse of talented instrumentalists, often overlooked by mass media.

Nineteen artistes presented different *ragas* and *dhun* on sitar, sarod, violin, *esraj*, *shehnai*, harmonium and flute as well as tabla *lahara* (variety of rhythms) in the two-day arrangement.

The main attraction on January 31 was a duet recital of sitar and sarod performed by Firoz Khan and M Yousuf Khan. The duo presented an improvised recital based on *raga desh*. The other attractions of the first day were *raga madhukosh* presented by Shamsur Rahman; the only classical *shehnai* player of the country, *dhun* performed by AFM Ekram Hossain on *esraj* and *raga tilang* on violin by Alauddin Miah.

Directed by Syed Meher Hossain, Srijon presented a group performance on tabla. Lead player Meher's improvisation with *esraj*, harmonium and percussion was catchy.

Moreover, Reenat Fouzia played *raga bhimpalasar* on sitar, upcoming artiste Salahuddin Mahmud Shantanu presented *raga emon* on harmonium. Bari Siddiqui played a *dhun* on the flute, Mahmudul Hassan played *raga jhinjhoti* on violin and Manik Khondokar performed *raga kirwani* on sitar on January 31.

On the following evening renowned classical instrument players such as Ustad Khurshid Khan, Nokul Kumar Biswas, M Moniruzzaman, Shahadat Hossain Khan,



Bari Siddiqui (L) plays a *dhun* on the flute

Quamruzzaman Moni, Pallab Sandal, Nusrat Mumtaz Ruposhi, Shukkur Ali and Mohammad Shamsul Haque presented recitals on sitar, sarod, harmonium, flute, clarinet, violin and tabla.

Nusrat Jahon, one of the viewers of the January 31 soiree, said, "I was immensely moved by some of the classical recitals. I had no idea that there are so many talented instru-

mentalists in Bangladesh. But, after listening to five presentations, my concentration flagged. The programme would have been more interesting if the artistes were limited to four or five. In that case the artistes would get time to improvise more on the *ragas*, which is the beauty of the classical music recitals. Moreover, the audience would also be able to concentrate till the end."

## Chekhov's penetrating insight for theatre lovers

Local thespians present Russian wit

FAYZA HAQ

To mark the 35th anniversary of diplomatic relations of Russia and Bangladesh, two Chekhov plays, *A Malefactor (Bhar)* and *The Proposal (Paigam)* were recently presented at the Russian Cultural Centre. The translation and stage versions were done by Abdullah Al Rashid and Sirajur Rahman.

Mamunur Rashid, theatre personality, speaking at the function, said that Chekhov, with his plays, *Cherry orchard*, *Three sisters* and *Uncle Vanya* has a special place for theatre lovers in Bangladesh. He said that Chekhov, though a playwright of earlier times, is relevant even today. Dr Shajedur Rahman, another theatre enthusiast, said that Russian litterateurs had shown Bangladeshis the way.

Speaking to director Abdullah Al Rashid, one gathered that he was fascinated by stage plays as a Jahangirnagar University student. Later, as an NGO worker, he came upon the existing Gorky Theatre at the Russian Cultural Centre in 1998, and changed it to the present name, as there was already a theatre group by the same name in Kolkata.

*Bhar* is based on a short story *A Malefactor* which deals with a social problem. The plot consists of a passerby, Hatim Ali, who looses a part in the railway engine in order to make a fishing bait. The lineman takes him to



A scene from the play *Bhar*

court although the mishap is unintentional. Earlier on, when political activists had removed the line no action had been taken against the political activists. Similarly, he did not complain against thugs who had earlier attacked the train with gunshots. Now, just to

appear in the good books of the railway authorities, the lineman takes Hatim Ali to court. The judge concludes by saying the weight (*bhar*) of the decision is on him, and sentences him to jail.

In contrast is *Paigam*, a slapstick comedy,

represents two feudal families, who resort to low level intrigues. They end up having conflicts over their pet dogs. The plot moves around the marriage proposal of Mohabbat (Rubupof in the original) and Dilbahar (Natasha in the Russian text). The plot reveals the quirks in the families such as the flirtatious habit of one of the personalities. Despite all odds the amorous feelings of the loving couple prevail and the play has a happy ending.

The earlier plays presented by the Chekhov Theatre include *Aniya* and *After the ball dance* by Maxim Gorky, Chekhov's *Marriage day* (translated by Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay), Salim Al Din's *Shangbad cartoon* (written in 1973), a satire in the form of street theatre. They also had a workshop on "Beauty, cruelty, Tolstoy and we".

The group, which has seven years to its credit, practices on three days of the week at the Russian Cultural Centre premises. The props in the plays belong to the group. The group provides its own costumes and lighting. There are 20 voluntary actors. So far they have produced seven plays.

The plays went down well with the audience, specially *Paigam* in the Old Dhaka dialect.

## 'Shundoritoma': Lux Drama of the week

CULTURAL CORRESPONDENT

Lux Drama of the week *Shundoritoma* will be aired tonight on Channel 1 at 7:50pm. Written and directed by Raju Alim, the play features the rocky relationship between Toma and Mehbub, both university students. Toma's mother died when she was a young girl and was raised by her father. The brilliant and upright Mehbub is a little senior to Toma. He falls for her at first sight but she remains unaware of this. Eventually Toma does learn the truth. From here the play begins to unravel.

The play is adapted by Al Mamun. Subhash Dutta, Hillol, Tinni, Raju Alim and Trishika play the lead roles in *Shundoritoma*.



(L-R) Tinni, Raju Alim and Subhash Dutta in the TV play

## Where fables turn real

Stars play out Disney fantasies



(L-R) Beyoncé as Alice in Wonderland, accompanied by Lyle Lovett as the March Hare and Oliver Platt as the Mad Hatter

To launch Disney Parks "Year of a Million Dreams" celebration, spectacular new images were unveiled recently featuring the work of acclaimed photographer Annie Leibovitz, and starring Scarlett Johansson as Cinderella, Beyoncé Knowles taking a spin in a giant teacup and David Beckham slaying a dragon.

Leibovitz's images also fulfil one of Beckham's dreams, as the Disney Parks project is his first endorsement since signing a contract to play professional soccer in the United States.

In addition to the three debut images, Disney Parks has commissioned more images by Leibovitz that will feature other celebrities in classic Disney fairy tale settings.

"I'm really delighted to be part of the 'Where Dreams Come True' campaign," said Leibovitz. "We live in difficult times and I feel, especially as a parent, that keeping dreams alive is one of the most important things we

can do." Each image features a scene with the featured celebrities transformed

into the role of a fabled Disney character, expressing their own dreams and imagination.

As Cinderella, Scarlett Johansson is seen running down a flight of stairs as the clock strikes midnight with her glass slipper unknowingly left behind. The tagline reads, "Where every Cinderella story comes true."

Beckham plays the part of the gallant Prince Phillip from *Sleeping Beauty*, atop his trusted steed fighting the evil dragon. The tagline reads, "Where imagination saves the day."

Beyoncé appears as "Alice in Wonderland," twirling in a teacup, accompanied by Oliver Platt as the Mad Hatter and Lyle Lovett as the March Hare. The tagline reads, "Where Wonderland is your destiny." The campaign premieres as a special insert in the March issues of *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, *Vogue*, *The New Yorker* and other magazines.

Source: Internet



David Beckham as Prince Phillip from *Sleeping Beauty*