

ASIF ZAMAN

The man behind the memes

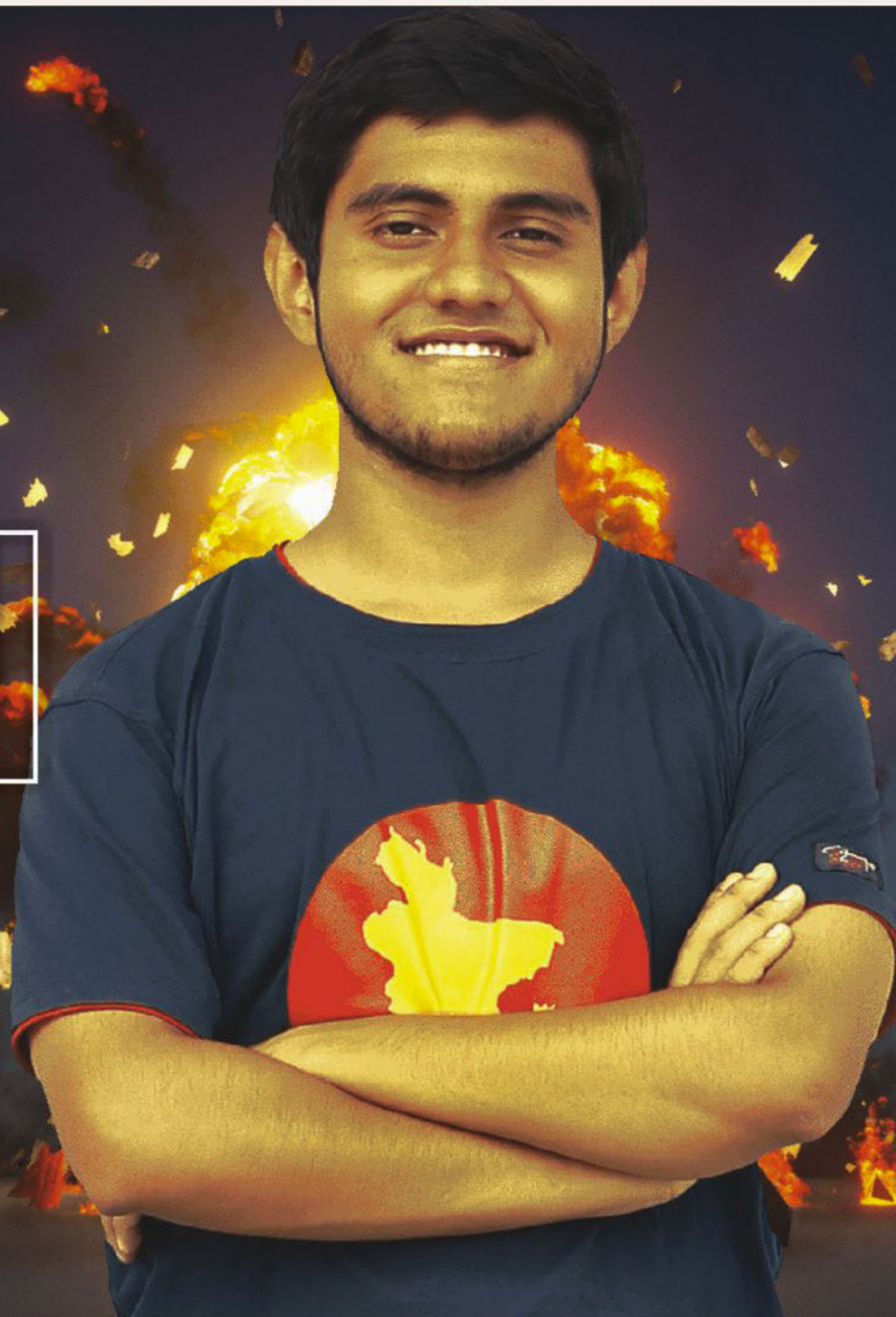


PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

WASIQUE HASAN

When you talk about homegrown memes, the name Asif Zaman is sure to come up. And why wouldn't it? As one of the most prolific meme-makers in Bangladesh and being the content director of Rantages, he has built a large fan base with his continuous output of top quality content. Being a fan, I was honoured when I got the opportunity to pick the brains of the man behind the memes. Following are some of the excerpts from the interview.

How does it feel when your memes take off and start new trends?

Asif Zaman: Feels great, to be honest. It's nice to get positive responses to a meme. Even better than that is knowing that I did something new, and the chance I took paid off. For example, I was one of the first people here to make the variants of the "dance, dancer; can, cancer" meme. As great as it feels to have the memes become popular, eventually I get tired of them. At one point they're just overused and cringeworthy, and I regret bringing something like that into the world.

What is it like to have a large fanbase?

AZ: I'm not sure you could call it "large", but it is really nice. Sometimes I'll have people recognise me on the streets, and they come up to me to take pictures. Those moments are special. Of course, that's not an all too common occurrence.

Not everything is good, however. Sometimes there are people who do not like my content. These people tend to get just a little bit triggered and form intense personal vendettas against me. But on the whole, it's a pleasant experience.

Important question - how do you pronounce "gif"?

AZ: (laughing) Hmm, good question. So I

pronounce it as gif, with a hard "g" like in gift. However, I know that the creator of gif pronounces it as "jif", which is the correct way to go.

Recently you've been an admin and active participant in the Facebook group "Rantages Goatposting". What is your take on this community-based approach to meme-making and sharing?

AZ: I think Rantages Goatposting has been a very good initiative. You see, people generally want to create memes. This group gives them the perfect opportunity to do that. Not only can they create memes, but they can get feedback and recognition as well if the meme is good enough. This is a problem I used to face at the start, when I'd keep posting memes on my Facebook page but hardly get any likes. These people can get advice and help from people in the group, which will only help them make better memes in the future.

The flipside of this is the problems that occur whenever there a large group of people get to share and project their opinions. People tend to reinforce ideas that fit their views of humour and hate on things that are different. Because of groupthink, the members decide objec-

tively what is funny and what isn't which hurts people whose senses of humour are slightly different.

How do you feel about the evolution of memes, from the humble rage comics to the abstract deep-fried memes? Where do you think memes are going to end up in the future?

AZ: Yes, memes have evolved quite a bit over the years. While they have tended to get more and more abstract over time, I don't think they will continue to be so. They will always be most popular in their trendy, mainstream format. In this way memes are different from art. Art can afford to be abstract and geared toward niche communities, but memes will always be targeted toward the general population. That is the target audience of memes, and memes will continue to be relatable.

What do you think of "Loss"?

AZ: I wasn't a big fan of it initially, but over time it's exceeded my expectations and now I can't say I dislike it.

What are your views on censorship, and on people who try to stop memes because they get offended?

AZ: When it comes to censorship, my views are quite liberal. Humour should

fall within free speech. You have a right to make something as offensive as you want, and I have the right to get as offended as I want. Unless it's blatant hate speech or an unfiltered flow of fake news, our free speech should not be curtailed through self-censorship, and humour should be a part of that. There are a lot of people online who want to make edgy content while still getting offended at other things, but that's not how it works. If you want to offend people, you have to be okay with getting offended yourself.

What are your long term plans, and how long do you think you will keep making memes?

AZ: Once I graduate, I'd like it if I could get a job at a content agency. The skills needed there would be similar to ones I've picked up on while making memes. As for making memes, there is no fixed plan. If I woke up tomorrow and didn't want to make memes anymore, I'd stop that instant. I make memes because I love to, and I'll keep making them as long as the love is there.

With a heart of ash and a PC of potato, Wasique Hasan could use some help. Send help: facebook.com/hasique.wasan