

# A heart-to-heart with Asaduzzaman Noor

Born on October 31, 1946, freedom fighter and former Cultural Affairs Minister Asaduzzaman Noor began his journey as an actor with theatre. His memorable roles include Baaker Bhai from Kothao Keo Nei, Nandail'er Yunus from Maatir Pinjirar Majhe Bondi Hoiya and Chhoto Mirza from Ayomoy, among many others. At the moment, he is attending a cultural festival titled 'A Season of Bangla Drama' in London organised by London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Recently, Noor shared his thoughts with Elita Karim of The Daily Star.

**What are you working on at the moment?**  
Right now, I am busy rehearsing for a play. Actually, I rehearse whenever I get time to! It's an adaptation, written by Pantho Shahriar, of Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice". I am playing Shylock. It will probably be staged soon. You will find plenty of elements from Bangladesh in this adaptation—for instance, the shipbreaking set up amongst others. Pantho will direct the play as well.

**What was your childhood like?**  
I have no memories of the time when my family moved here from India after partition. I was hardly one and a half years old or two in 1948. We still have some distant relatives in India but we are not really in touch. I was educated in Nilphamari right from the beginning, except for the two years that I did at Charmichael. I then moved to Dhaka in 1966. In Dhaka University, I got into Law but then shifted to Political Science. But it was during my MA first paper that the war broke out in 1971, which is why I could not continue with my education. It's not like I ever really wanted to study a lot as it is!

**Did you always know that you were going to be an actor on stage and TV?**  
I was not very serious about acting. When I was growing up in Nilphamari, there were no big establishments for theatre actors or the audience. Maybe once or twice a year, the elders would get together and decide to put up a play. My father was interested in theatre, which is why I too would get involved and follow the elders around. I was of course just an audience member. Maybe I would do a small role or two in a school play. But I never saw myself becoming a celebrated actor. I would perform on stage because I liked to.

We grew up in a small town, hence we would do anything and everything that grabbed our interest—recitation competition at school, drawing or sketching competitions, writing something for magazines, etc.

But back then, it was not like the elders in the family would give us some extra encouragement for these activities, the way parents do today. Reciting, acting, writing, singing, dancing, etc.—these were very common back then, and it was taken for granted that children and youngsters would definitely participate in them. And it was not only me, of course. There were many others who were involved in the same activities.

**Can you share a few memories from your Sanskritik Shongshod days?**  
In Dhaka, as part of the Chhatra Union, we created a cultural group called Sanskritik Shongshod. I was the president for a while and was involved in the administration and organisational work, rather than acting on stage. When I was studying in the law department at Dhaka University, the head of the department was Professor Abul Momen, who himself was a writer and would write plays. He made me act in some of his plays. Back then, we would request actors and directors from outside the university to come and work with the Shongshod. For instance, Hasan Imam would direct, Golam Mostafa would be acting—Ataur Rahman, Dr Enamul Haque and many more would join in as well. Many of them had day jobs while others were students. If I were lucky or if it was needed, I would probably do a small role or two. Otherwise my job was mainly to supervise and see if everything was working on schedule, getting the stage ready, sometimes make tea for everyone, looking for rickshaws at the end of the day to take everyone home, etc.!

It was only after independence that I had begun to act. Back then, I worked at the Soviet Press Information. There was also a broadsheet newspaper called *Chitraly* which would come out every week with cine news. But it also had a section for literature, history and theatre. I used to work part time with the paper as well. In fact, lots of big names



Asaduzzaman Noor

PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

and well-known writers had worked for that paper, for instance the famous poet Syed Shamsul Haque.

I was asked to do a story on the rising number of theatre groups in Dhaka. So, while interviewing directors and actors, I met Aly Zaker, who was already working as an actor. And then I was asked to watch their rehearsals which used to take place in Rajarbagh. Eventually, I got involved in these rehearsals and would often prompt the actors with their dialogues. That way, all the dialogues would be in my head, memorised. One day while rehearsing for a fight scene, Abul Hayat got punched badly and broke his nose! The play was only two days away. Someone had to take his place and I was the only one, since I knew all the dialogues. Essentially, that's how I got on the stage and began to act!

**What was it like being a student politician back then?**

As a student politician I was very active. I think it was mainly because of my father who was a left-wing politician. He was of course a teacher in Nilphamari, which is why most of his work was done behind the scenes, and

he preferred it that way. Both my parents were teachers, by the way. Things had begun to get tense after 1962. It was the era when protests of all types would happen against Ayub Khan. I too became part of the protests by participating in a protest march against Ayub Khan. One may say, it was my induction into politics. And since then, I have been marching!

When we were students and involved in politics, things were definitely different. I don't think we used to think the way many of the student politicians think today. You see, I used to stay at Iqbal Hall while studying at Dhaka University, which is now called the Zahurul Haq Hall—a major platform for student politics. We had enemies of course and often we would also get into fights. Every other week our mattresses and pillows would be left burning inside our rooms! At one point we got so tired of buying new mattresses and pillows that we gave up! But I don't think the idea of expecting money from contractors for building university structures ever struck us.

Today when I see a student politician travel

in expensive bikes and cars, I go back to my own student days, when some of the big names in politics were seen travelling mainly in rickshaws. I remember an incident when a famous politician, I would not want to name him, received a car from his in-laws after he got married. We were ecstatic! He would often come around to the halls in the car leaving us mesmerised. Otherwise, life was simpler back then and young politicians were sincerely thinking about the betterment of the country.

Despite all that, I still think student politics should be in practice. In a democracy, it is natural for young minds to discuss and debate. Otherwise, soon there will be a generation of people who will only think of themselves and be indifferent to what is happening to other people. As a student politician, we would also think about how to keep the students busy in healthy activities. We used to organise football tournaments and other activities, in a way taking care of the student body as well. Young people will raise their voice and nobody can stop that. However, student politicians today must also realise that being a politician means giving, helping and speaking for those who cannot, and not taking advantage of his or her position. They must speak out against what is happening in society today. They should speak against children getting raped, violence against women and many of the ills that are taking place every day in the country.

**What advice would you give to the young people who follow your footsteps?**

I have never really thought about dreams or had any aspirations as such. I faced situations and followed the paths life took me to. But for the present generation, I would say that they need to have a proper plan as to how to achieve the target they have set out to achieve. They are young and they have a lot of energy, hence they must be ready to work hard and not look for shortcuts. That's the secret to success.

# Truth about the Syrian chemical attack of 2018

Two whistleblowers shed light on the dark occurrence in Douma that could have started World War III.



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

In a suburb of Damascus called Douma, that had been occupied by the militant group Jaysh al-Islam, the 2018 Syrian chemical attack that made headlines all over the world allegedly took place on April 7—right as Syrian forces were moving in to retake the area. The western media unequivocally accused the Syrian government of dropping gas cylinders on "moderate rebels" (thus anointing members of Jaysh al-Islam as "moderates") and killing at least 43 people. Prompting US, France and Britain to launch a barrage of cruise missiles a week later against the Syrian government. Such use of force according to the UN Charter, can only be legally justified as an act of self-defence against a prior armed attack, which it wasn't, as none of the countries in question were ever attacked by Syria, or with the formal authorisation of the UN Security Council, of which there was none—making it illegal under international law, and a blatant act of aggression against a sovereign state. Moreover, the attack was carried out without any international investigation confirming at the time that the Syrian government had indeed used chemical weapons in Douma.

Both these facts got drowned out by the international outrage, fuelled on by western governments and the media in particular. A year later, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the international chemical weapons watchdog, concluded in its final report released in March, that the cylinders in Douma were likely dropped from the air, all but pointing the finger at the Syrian government, the only one with aircrafts—thus providing a veneer of legitimacy to the western attack on Syria.

Once the demonization of the Syrian government was complete, the incident was conveniently forgotten. But the story did not end there.

In May this year, a leaked engineering assessment given to a group of UK-based academics known as the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media, revealed that an expert with the OPCW Fact Finding Mission (FFM) had in fact challenged the conclusion of the OPCW's final report to the UN Security Council on March 1, 2019. According to the leaked document, the "dimensions, characteristics and appearance of the cylinders and the surrounding scene of the incidents were inconsistent with what would have been expected in the case of either cylinder having been delivered from either cylinder having been delivered from an aircraft." This finding suggests there is "a higher probability that both cylinders were manually placed at those

two locations rather than being delivered from aircraft."

According to award-winning physicist and MIT professor emeritus Theodore Postol, a leading expert in missile technology, "The leaked document provided unambiguous contradictory data from the UN Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) and supporting technical analysis that explicitly showed that the attacks were instead staged." Postol said that the documents provide enough evidence to suggest that "someone had placed the chlorine cylinders at the alleged locations in the hope of making it appear like the cylinders had been dropped from an aircraft." And Postol wasn't the only one challenging the OPCW's conclusion.

Robert Fisk, a veteran correspondent for *The Independent* (UK), said a doctor who treated the victims in Douma told him they had suffered "from dust and dirt inhalation, not toxic gas exposure". Similarly, Riam Dalati, a BBC producer

Based on the whistleblower's "extensive presentation, including internal emails, text messages and draft reports", the panel "unanimously" expressed its "alarm over unacceptable practices in the investigation of the alleged chemical attack in Douma".

The panel, consisting of Nobel Peace Prize nominee Jose Bustani, Brazilian diplomat and the first Director General of the OPCW; Richard Falk, professor emeritus of International Law, Princeton University; Kristinn Hrafnsson, editor in chief of WikiLeaks; Dr Helmut Lohrer, MD, Board member of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War and others, concluded that: "A critical analysis of the final report of the Douma investigation left the panel in little doubt that conclusions drawn from each of the key evidentiary pillars of the investigation (chemical analysis, toxicology, ballistics and witness testimonies) are flawed and bear little relation to the facts."

said that evidence provided by the OPCW whistleblower "suggested there was no chemical gas attack [in Douma]". And a lot of the commotion of there being one "was propaganda...led by the rebel side to try and bring in American planes, which in fact did happen."

So what does it all boil down to? About a month before the chemical attack in Douma is alleged to have happened, US President Donald Trump publicly said that the US military would soon be withdrawing troops from Syria—which the powerful US military-industrial-complex is strongly against. The Trump administration had similarly said back in 2017 that the US was leaving Syria, and within days, the highly dubious Khan Shaykhun chemical attack took place in Syria, forcing Trump to reverse his stance.

Scepticism surrounding that occurrence was also very high, similar to the Douma incident, because acclaimed journalists like Seymour Hersh have been highlighting various plot holes in the official story about chemical weapons in Syria since 2013. And as Australian journalist Caitlin Johnstone explains, "[Syrian president] Assad would stand nothing to gain and everything to lose" by using chemical weapons that are "highly ineffective" in a "battle he'd already essentially won". Whereas groups such as the "Al Qaeda-linked" Jaysh-al-Islam, who were "controlling things on the ground in Douma", would definitely have "everything to gain by staging a chemical attack in the desperate hope that it would draw NATO powers into attacking the Syrian government and perhaps saving their necks."

Hence, if this was a court case where the jury would look at the motives of different parties to determine a verdict, it is more likely that it would be the militants on the ground who would be found guilty. And those who had tried to pin the blame on Assad's government for their own geopolitical interests, despite the risks of starting World War III, as the Russians too were present on the ground in Syria during the west's retaliatory strike, would most likely also be found guilty of being accomplices to the attempted frame-up job, aimed at escalating violence in Syria.

Interestingly, on October 6, Trump had again announced that American troops would withdraw from northernmost Syria. What awaits this announcement? Will it be followed by another incident that raises or attempts to raise tensions in Syria? Will American troops continue to occupy parts of Syria in violation of international law, despite the announcement, as has previously happened? Or will Trump keep his word and withdraw US troops from a region where they have no business being in, in the first place?

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Damascus skies erupted with missile fire as the US, UK and France launched an attack on Syria targeting different parts of Damascus on April 14, 2018. PHOTO: AFP

who has covered Syria extensively, also claimed in February that the attack was "staged". After conducting an on-ground investigation for six-months, Dalati said: "I can tell you that Jaysh al-Islam ruled Douma with an iron fist. They coopted activists, doctors and humanitarians with fear and intimidation. In fact, one of the 3 or 4 people filming the scene was Dr Abu Bakr Hanan, a 'brute and shifty' doctor affiliated with Jaysh Al-Islam."

And now, a second whistleblower has come forward challenging the OPCW's final report.

On October 15, an independent British civil society organisation, Courage Foundation, convened a panel of experts from the fields of disarmament, international law, journalism, military operations, medicine and intelligence in Brussels, to meet a member of the OPCW's team that investigated the Douma incident.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**FIDEL CASTRO**  
(1926-2016)  
Political leader of Cuba

"Humanity can learn from those who have broken their chains. Those who have chained humanity for centuries cannot teach humanity anything."

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Played a role
- 6 Deduction
- 11 Barber's job
- 12 Singer Cara
- 13 Moved a raft
- 14 Salad servers
- 15 Like O. Henry stories
- 17 Stretch of history
- 18 Sprinted
- 19 Body for anatomy study
- 22 Overhead trains
- 23 Stadiums
- 24 Europe's boot
- 25 Money, in slang
- 27 Acquire
- 30 "Can I talk to you?"
- 31 Lennon's wife

**DOWN**

- 32 Turn bad
- 33 Letter after kappa
- 35 Medal, for example
- 38 Ankle bone
- 39 Rocker David
- 40 Weld, as power
- 41 Digging tool
- 42 Places
- 1 "La Source" painter
- 10 Labor leader Chavez
- 16 Chewy candy
- 20 Washables requiring special care
- 21 Some amount of
- 24 Writer Levin
- 25 1950s singing style
- 26 Canada's capital
- 27 Wineglass
- 28 Survive
- 29 Drinks to
- 30 Seizes
- 34 Long skirt
- 36 Free (of)
- 37 Singing Sandra

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10-19

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

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