

Stand-up comedy: A niche industry with limitless potential

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"Bring your work to Naveed's Comedy Club's cafe. No charge! Stay as long as you want to. No purchase necessary. We have everything here: a great workspace, WiFi, printers, projectors, whiteboards, even a stage to practice your presentations," announced ace comedian Naveed Mahbub, in a recent video on social media.

A forerunner in the country's stand-up comedy scene, Naveed Mahbub has extended his comedy club's space and encouraged office-goers to relax at his premises, a unique way to get entertained in the city amidst the generic restaurants, sporadic musical concerts, and ever-diminishing space.

Stand-up comedy in Bangladesh is gradually flourishing with the emergence of young comedians. Popular acts, including the likes of Amin and Ashik, Ananda Mazumder, Bipro and Zahaan Brishty, have already carved a loyal fanbase amidst the young urban demographic.

However, there are major problems that stand-up comedians face, which stands in the way of these young talents turning the "scene" into a full-fledged industry. The lack of sponsorship and proper venues, financial instability, and freedom of speech make it still a niche industry in Bangladesh.

Comedy duo Amin and Ashik organised a country-wide tour, along with Ananda Mazumder and Rafsan Sabab last year, which got massive responses from

the audiences.

"We started off with a 35-seater in Mirpur, and within two months, we covered all of Dhaka just by sheer support of the fans of our podcast," added Ashik.

The tickets to all the shows were sold out, yet Amin and Ashik believe that they could not find "commercial" success.

"We went to Rajshahi with our own money, and we didn't have any sponsors. We used the money that we received from our sponsored content on social media," said Ashik.

Fortunately, we did not have to pay for the venues, as the restaurant owners let us do the show for free. They kept 50 percent of the revenues of the tickets. With respect to how much money we earned, it was a break-even project."

"We need to alert the mass audiences of our existence first. Financially, stand-up comedy will need the next five to ten years to be commercially viable. We even had some potential sponsors, but when they gave us guidelines, we said 'no' to them, as they clearly went against our freedom of speech," said Amin.

"It boils down to the comedian. A sponsor is someone who practically sits there with free money, and wonders what benefits they can reap. For example, if I invest 100 taka on a comedy show, will I get back 150 taka?" explains Naveed Mahbub, who explained that a sponsor looks at not just a comedian, but anyone with a level of brand equity.

"Amin and Ashik have carved out a niche, and many young people love them. Many brands are also relying on them for advertisement. So, the question is, are we good enough?" added the comedian.

The potential for expansion in stand-up comedy is there, however, the lack of female performers remains a concern.

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Naveed Mahbub, besides being a renowned comedian, is a patron of stand-up comedy in Dhaka.

"It takes a lot of courage to come up on stage and perform. Women constantly feel that they are going to be judged, and thus they tend to shy away from doing comedy," said Naveed.



PHOTOS: COLLECTED



Amin Hannan Chowdhury, a talented young comedian.



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