

I want to learn Bangla: Varun Grover

The Daily Star interviews the writer of 'Masaan', 'Qala' and other classics.

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TABASSUM ISLAM

Some remember him from the stage of Aisi Taisi Democracy, for his satirical remarks against Hindu nationalism, while some absolutely adore him for writing those poetic verses in the recently popular Hindi song, Shauq.

Film enthusiasts recognise him for his wonderful storytelling in *Masaan*—a rare Bollywood film dealing with casteism in India. And some might know him as the feminist ally 'Majnu' in *Qala*, a recently released film on Netflix.

National Award-winning lyricist, scriptwriter, stand-up comedian, political satirist, poet and now director, Varun Grover has been gliding through all these creative roles for the whole of the last decade. He shines in each role with the magical combination of wit, poetry, and honesty.

We were talking to Varun on a chilly February morning in Rotterdam, Netherlands, just before his debut film *All India Rank* premiered as the first South Asian closing film at the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR).

With a hint of excitement and wit in his voice, Varun talked to The Daily Star about his first film, personal journey, song writing process, and feminism.

What is 'All India Rank' about?

All India Rank is actually a semi-autobiographical film. I grew up in Lucknow in the 1990s, just when the Indian economy was being liberalised. And suddenly there was this obsession in the middle-class to reach the next level of the class system, by sending their kids to highly competitive educational institutions like IIT (Indian Institute of Technology).

I am also a part of that first wave of social obsession. Eventually, I went to an IIT as well. I think that period is a defining one for me, as it was for an entire Indian generation. So, that was the origin point of the film. I tried to tell what I went through, what my friends

went through at that particular time.

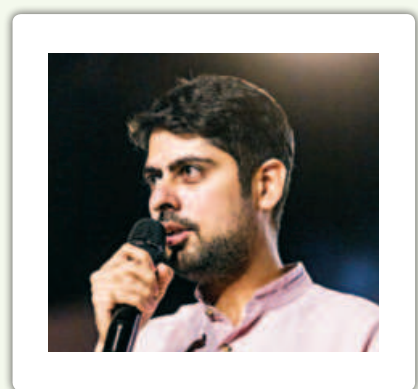
I tried to tell the story of a 16/17-year-old going through the competitive education system and his personal struggle as a teenager in the backdrop of the 1990s. You can say it's a coming-of-age film.

In Bollywood, films rarely deal with stories of teenagers or young adults. Even if they do, it is usually something very commercial like *Student of the Year*. With *All India Rank*, I tried to make a film that is simple and authentic.

Are you excited about your directorial debut? Especially given the circumstances.

I am very excited! The International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) is one of my dream festivals, it has been on my wish list for so long.

It's a new film, in terms of a totally new crew. First time cinematographer, first time production designer, first time music composer, and of course me as a first-time director! We don't have any stars. So, we wanted a platform that can focus on the film, and only on the film. This festival is



the perfect platform in that regard. And in today's world, when every film festival is struggling with maintaining authenticity and having a voice,



PHOTOS: COLLECTED

IFFR still stands as one of the most genuine film festivals which represent new voices.

When did you realize you wanted to be a filmmaker?

I only knew that I wanted to write. Even during my time at IIT. When I started writing for films, I found out that if you want your voice to be uncompromised, if you want full creative control, you have to be the director, you can't just be the writer. A writer's work very naturally gets reinterpreted by the director and the entire team. Then something gets lost in the interpretation. Even in a best-case scenario like *Masaan*, which is written by me and directed by a talented director like Neeraj

Ghaywan, I still felt something was different from what I had imagined while writing it.

So, when I was thinking about this particular story, I wanted to tell it by myself. The feeling of nostalgia was too strong and it is probably the most personal thing in the world. So, I did not want to give this story to any other director.

Was it scary to take the decision to leave a secure job to become a storyteller?

For me, not following my dreams was scary. I am grateful to both my parents, who were very supportive. We have this concept of a 'settled' life, defined by getting good job, getting married, and so on. But my

parents were pretty okay with me not following that path.

I was constantly aware of the fact that life can end at any time. It is a slightly depressing thought. But I always knew that the end of life is just a moment away. So, if you want to take a chance on something, you have to do it now, right away! I thought let's at least try it. After that, if it doesn't work, that's all right.

If nothing else worked out, I would open a food cart and sell *Poha*. You know, I can definitely make the best *Poha* in the world.

Let's move on to your lyrics. 'Tu Kisi Rail si Gujarati Hain' from 'Masaan' is a favourite of mine. You really captured the language of the protagonist, who comes from a lower socio-economic background.

The script and the brief from the director helped a lot, of course. But when you are writing, you have to know the world of that particular story very well. Knowing the world very intimately, and internalising the world where the story or the film is taking place is very important. For this song from *Masaan*, it was a must to understand the surroundings of Benaras. For *Moh Moh ke Dhaage* from *Dum Laga ke Haisha*, I had to understand when the song is taking place and what complicated emotion it is expressing. Because only then, you can imagine. After that, it's a magical process of writing.

We, in Bangladesh, love your performances, songs, and films. What do you want to say to your Bangladeshi fans?

I am really glad to know that people in Bangladesh know me. It is truly an honour that Bangladeshi people love my work. I also want to learn Bangla/Bengali. It has such an enriched heritage of literature and films. I would really love to learn the language so that I can enjoy them without losing anything in translation.

NEWS

2 secys barraged with queries

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that we don't have any failures... There may have some flaws and there is a scope for correcting these," he said.

Then Nuri said different agencies under the ministry have completed 445 projects after the road transport and bridges minister took the ministry helm. But only the long delayed BRT project is being talked about, he added.

About a reporter's question of bringing discipline in the road transport sector, Nuri said, "It is true that people are getting killed in crashes.

But we are also working. Everyone has to be aware to control accidents."

He failed to give any direct answer when asked whether he could tell the names of five projects, except "three bridges project" and partially opened metro rail, which were completed by the original deadline and cost.

He said projects were revised due to different complexities and logical grounds. But they work to ensure accountability by taking action against those responsible in case of any allegation, he added.

Asked why three-wheelers, which were banned on 22 highways in 2015, still ply the highways, the secretary said officials are taking action regularly. But a huge number of people are involved in this sector and officials are working to bring them under a system, he added.

Both the secretaries sought cooperation from journalists in raising awareness among the people about traffic rules.

Chiefs of different agencies under the ministry were also present.

Hajj package cost

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Bangladeshis completed their registrations. Of them, 9,829 registered to perform hajj under government management, said officials at the capital's Ashkona Hajj Camp.

This year, Bangladesh has a hajj quota of 1.27 lakh pilgrims. The hajj is likely to take place on June 27, depending on the sighting of the moon.

On February 1, the government fixed the hajj cost for each pilgrim at Tk 6,83,018, up by about Tk 1.61 lakh from the previous year.

This drew huge criticism from different quarters as the cost is higher than that of the neighbouring countries.

Of the total cost, Tk 1,97,797 was fixed as airfare for each passenger.

On March 14, the High Court questioned how ordinary people could perform hajj given the high cost of the government's package.

"Why doesn't the government allocate budgets for the hajj like other countries in the world?" it asked.

The HC bench of Justice MK Kamrul Kader and Justice Mohammad Ali made this observation while hearing a writ petition regarding the revision of the government's hajj package.

Following the hearing on a writ petition, the HC on March 15 asked the authorities concerned to take initiatives to reduce the hajj cost.

Ingredients

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blocks for RNA, a molecule carrying directions for building and operating living organisms. Niacin, also called Vitamin B3 or nicotinic acid, is vital for their metabolism.

No guardrail on that part of expressway

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around 24 feet below, the probe body found.

The Daily Star obtained a copy of the report, which was submitted to Madaripur Deputy Commissioner Rahima Khaton on Tuesday night.

However, Road, Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader in a statement on Monday said the accident in Madaripur's Shibchar upazila did not occur because of faults on the road.

Meanwhile, Road Safety Foundation, a non-government organisation, claimed some 107 people were killed in 79 road accidents on the expressway between January 2022 and March 19 this year.

On Sunday morning, Emad Paribahan bus, heading to Dhaka from Khulna, fell from the Dhaka-Bhanga expressway in Madaripur's Shibchar upazila, killing 19 people.

The probe body, formed by the Madaripur district administration,

found that speeding and the vehicle's unfitness were key reasons behind the accident.

Pallab Kumar Hazra, additional district magistrate and head of the four-member probe committee, said the fitness certificate of the bus was expired, its registration was suspended and the driver did not have the proper license to operate heavy vehicles.

"The vehicle's registration had been suspended since last November, following an accident in which it was involved," he told reporters at his office yesterday.

He added that the driver was operating a heavy vehicle though he had a license to only operate medium-sized ones. "This is a punishable offense."

The road was also slippery due to rain that day, he said.

"All these factors contributed to the accident."

Pallab further said, "We have

prepared the report following a two-day thorough investigation that included spot visits, interviewing eye-witnesses and survivors, inspecting the damaged vehicle and scrutinising its documents."

Responding to a question, he said, "We can't confirm whether there was a flat tyre and whether that was why the driver lost control. As it's a technical issue, a team of experts will further investigate it."

The probe body also incorporated a 14-point recommendation in the report to curb road accidents on the expressway. One of those were to make seatbelt wearing mandatory for all passengers of all vehicles.

Other members of the probe committee are Md Moniruzzaman Fakir, additional superintendent of police in Madaripur; Shahnevez Hasanat E-Rabbi, assistant professor at Buet, and Mohammad Nurul Hossain, assistant director of BRTA.

PM to visit US in April

FROM PAGE 1
the outcome of its collaboration with Bangladesh, which has enabled the country to achieve lower middle-income status only within four decades of its independence, The Daily Star has learnt from finance ministry officials involved with the proceedings.

"It has reduced poverty by half in record time, reduced inequality significantly, and since 2000 maintained robust growth. It has shown the world that with commitment, resilience and visionary leadership, a country can achieve feats that very few dare to imagine. That is what they want to emphasise," said one of the officials.

While many development experts were sceptical, the WB realised the potential of the young nation while recognising the devastations caused by the war, he said on the condition of anonymity as he is not authorised to speak with the media.

In the ensuing years, Bangladesh became the largest recipient of funding from the WB's International Development Association (IDA), which provides concessional financing to poor nations, making the multilateral lender the country's largest external funder with more than a quarter of the total foreign aid the country receives.

Bangladesh currently has the largest ongoing IDA program totalling about \$16 billion in 56 projects.

Since 1972, the World Bank has committed about \$39 billion in grants, interest-free, and concessional credits to the country to address its development challenges.

However, there were some hiccups in the partnership when the WB pulled out of the Padma Bridge project in 2012 over allegations of corruption and imposed conditions for the continuation of the loan talks with the government, which was declined.

At the time of the Padma Bridge tussle, the Washington-based multilateral lender was annually committing to \$1 billion, said Axel van Trotsenburg, the WB's managing director of operations, at a programme to mark 50 years of partnership with Bangladesh in Dhaka in January.

In recent years, the WB has been committing to more than \$2 billion a year, he said.

Through a robust programme of technical, analytical and financial support, the World Bank Group is now helping Bangladesh achieve its vision of becoming an upper-middle income country by the next decade, the finance ministry officials said.

Sirens blared across the capital and swathes of northern Ukraine, and the military said it had shot down 16 of 21 Iranian-made Shahed suicide drones.

In an apparent reference to the Chinese president's visit to the Russian capital, Zelensky tweeted: "Every time someone tries to hear the word 'peace' in Moscow, another order is given there for such criminal strikes."

Russia launches

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In Rzhyshev, a riverside town south of the capital, at least six people were killed and 18 others were taken to hospital when two dormitories at a college were struck by a drone. More than 100 workers and 28 vehicles were deployed to the scene, and the search for survivors was continuing, authorities said.

No homeless people

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upazilas free of homeless or landless people. The districts are Madaripur, Gazipur, Narsingdi, Joypurhat, Rajshahi, Chapainawabganj and Chuadanga.

She earlier announced that 52 upazilas as well as Panchagarh and Magura districts are homeless and landless free areas.

Talking about the achievement, Hasina said if any family of these areas becomes homeless and landless due to natural disasters or other factors, the family will be given houses along with land.

She asked all to find out the landless families throughout the country or any family becoming homeless due to natural disasters or any other reason in the areas that were already declared homeless-free. The government will provide them with homes, she added.

At the event, she exchanged views with the beneficiaries of Nayapara Ashrayan project in Gazipur's Sreepur upazila and Uttarpar Ashrayan project under Barishal's Banaripara.

With the handover of 39,365 houses, a total of 196,825 people have now found shelter, getting semi-pucca houses on their own land.

PM's Principal Secretary M Tofazzel Hossain Miah conducted the event.

The 159 upazilas that were declared

homeless-free areas include eight upazilas in Netrakona; six each in Narsingdi, Brahmanbaria, Cumilla, Rajshahi and Pirojpur; five each in Gazipur, Bogura and Kushtia; four each in Gopalganj, Madaripur, Kishoreganj, Sirajganj, Joypurhat, Chapainawabganj, Chuadanga, Patuakhali, Barishal and Sylhet; three each in Dhaka, Rajbari, Tangail, Mymensingh, Sherpur, Jamalpur, Chandpur, Dinajpur, Naogaon, Natore, Pabna, Satkhira, Jashore and Habiganj; two each in Manikganj, Munshiganj, Faridpur, Chattogram, Rangpur, Nilphamari, Meherpur and Jhalakathi; and one each in Shariatpur, Cox's Bazar, Gaibandha, Thakurgaon, Bhola, Barguna, Moulvibazar and Sunamganj.

The 52 upazilas, which were earlier declared homeless-free areas, are five in Panchagarh; four each in Mymensingh, Magura, Feni and Chattogram; three in Rajshahi; two each in Madaripur, Manikganj, Laxmipur and Bogura; and one each in Dhaka, Kishoreganj, Tangail, Rajbari, Faridpur, Netrakona, Jamalpur, Gaibandha, Dinajpur, Thakurgaon, Nilphamari, Naogaon, Joypurhat, Natore, Pabna, Chapainawabganj, Jhenidah, Satkhira, Jhalakathi and Patuakhali.

Tigers look to seal

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ODI was washed out by rain.

Despite those dominant performances, head coach Chandika Hathurusingha will keep a keen eye on the areas that he expects the Tigers to improve on ahead of the ODI World Cup later this year.

Although Bangladesh's batting unit seem to be in fine form, ODI skipper Tamim Iqbal is yet to make an impact in the recent times. The left-hander has not scored a fifty in his last six innings and his last century came back in 2021 against Zimbabwe.

The likes of Towhid Hridoy and Nazmul Hossain Shanto have made up for that, continuing to impress, while the Tigers' fast bowling department has also gained confidence by testing their skills on sporting tracks at home.

On the other hand, Ireland will once again be tested by the hosts and it is going to be a daunting task for the visitors to stage a turnaround and save the series.

Ramadan begins

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during the lunar month, a time of restraint and austerity.

President M Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina issued separate messages greeting the countrymen and all Muslim Ummah across the world with the advent of the holy month of Ramadan.