



VISUAL: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

DHAKA AIRPORT

A tale of grime and punishment



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

Before you decide to roll your eyes in derision of yet another airport rant by yours truly, let me explain why I can't stop cribbing about the shoddy state of Dhaka airport. It's because every time I come back from a trip, I realise yet again the level of apathy and neglect the airport authorities have maintained to be able to allow for the most unthinkable chaos to continue. And how this total disregard for passengers' comfort and disdain towards their own responsibilities as airport managers has blissfully gone on unabated for decades on end.

So this is how the story goes. Remember those days when you would get butterflies in the stomach as the wheels touched the tarmac and you realised you were finally home, your motherland, and soon would be greeted by your loved ones? Nowadays, it's more like an uncomfortable churning as I dread what I will have to face at our wonderful Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) in Dhaka.

The first beings to greet you most pointedly will be the persistent mosquitos on the bus that have actually divided themselves into two special SWAT teams: one for the outgoing passengers to give them a grand, itchy departure, and the other for the incoming humans so that they are assured of their destination – their homeland.

But the silent mosquito brigades are not what makes Dhaka airport stand out. It is more the absence of cleanliness that hits you like a tonne of bricks. It is a far, far cry from the airport during the Covid days, when the shine from the steel could blind you and the squeaky clean floors could require a hip replacement. Funnily enough, the floors are still

slippery – not because they are too clean, but due to the layers of sand accumulated while the cleaners are on their sabbatical. Only the brave will venture into the regular airport bathrooms (not the ones in the VIP lounges, obviously) where toilets have been left unflushed, floors left wet and muddy, and the toilet paper is a precious thing of the past.

This mysterious absence of hygiene can be easily spotted at the immigration booths (when you are leaving Dhaka) where various sizes of cockroaches can be seen crawling over the glass panels, happily coexisting and sharing snacks in this booth with the indifferent human occupant. If you are lucky to have found fairly manageable immigration lines and feel quite gleeful at how fast you have come out, wipe that smug smile off your face. The mayhem created by passengers from multiple flights trying to find their luggage after at least an hour since you reached the baggage carousel will bring you back on the ground with a painful thud. The selfish, boorish behaviour we see on our roads is replicated at the airport, with every passenger pushing their trolley forward because everyone wants to be the first to get out through that narrow opening and breeze through the Green Channel.

Unfortunately, just like our traffic, this causes impossible choking points that take forever to untangle, which is often accompanied by skirmishes and plenty of expletives being uttered in various dialects. There is also the possibility of getting your foot smashed when an overloaded trolley tilts with all the merry jostling and lands a big-sized box with a television inside right on your toes.

Ladies, please do not wear open-

toed sandals – closed, padded sneakers are the safest bet.

As you eye what resembles a battlefield, you may wonder why there isn't a single airport official at least attempting to bring some order to the mayhem; why you and hundreds of others have been left to figure it all out by yourselves – just like the constricting points on our city roads. Only when you come near customs will you see the bevy of enthusiastic uniformed personnel. Wonder why.

Then, finally, you are free from this surreal web and can go towards the car park where your vehicle is supposed to be waiting to allow you to escape this hell. This is where you will have the privilege of witnessing the different shades of green mould, thanks to months – perhaps years – of water dripping from the air conditioners onto the walls and ground and accumulating into a grimy puddle. The car park, in fact, is the place where garbage and grime are married and spread all over the dark corners. This is despite the fact that parking costs Tk 100 per car, so multiply that with the thousands parking EVERY DAY, and you will be left to wonder why at least a fraction of that astronomical sum is not used to clean up the car park of this "international airport."

If you ask an official about this, they will no doubt say it's because of the construction of the airport's new dream terminal and because the night flights have been suspended, so there are too many flights packed into the day. This would have been a valid argument if things had been any different before the construction of the new terminal even began. The griminess, in fact, was there long before the construction – it is just a characteristic of any public institution in our country.

The new terminal promises to be grander, shinier, and more efficient. But if you have the same people working there, with the same attitude, and the same level of oversight (which is zero), how long will it be before the Mosquito Brigade and Cockroach Colonies relocate to the posher side of town?

Coke Studio Bangla's 'Nahubo': A Case for Hybridity

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NAFISA TANJEEM and MUKTASREE CHAKMA

Coke Studio Bangla's latest offering, *Nahubo*, released on March 18 and featuring a Hajong song by a Hajong singer, sparked a series of debates in both Bangalee and Indigenous communities. The same Hajong singer wrote the song *Nasek Nasek*, which was released in February 2022 as the inaugural song of the very first season of Coke Studio Bangla, and was adored by Coke Studio followers in Bangladesh and abroad. What made *Nasek Nasek* so popular, whereas *Nahubo* received sceptical responses?

Some people would argue that it's because of the quality of music or the taste of individual listeners. Nevertheless, there is a larger politics of identity and nationalism undergirded in the responses that *Nasek Nasek* and *Nahubo* each received.

Coke Studio Bharat and Coke Studio Pakistan were named after the respective countries where they were established. However, Coke

mainstream Bangalee followers got uncomfortable for a variety of reasons. For example, in *Nahubo*, an Indigenous person appeared as the first repeat singer of Coke Studio Bangla, as opposed to other influential and popular Bangalee singers, singing a song written in an Indigenous language. The Indigenous song was combined with a rap verse by Sohana Rahaman (known by her stage name, Daughter of Coastal). The rap was performed not in standard Bangla, but in a Chattogram dialect that is not easily comprehensible by most Bangla speakers.

On top of that, the rap section – in the style of a traditionally hypermasculine and male-dominated genre in South Asia – was performed by a female singer wearing a hijab. She delivered a fierce and bold performance, claiming that she defied the oppressive gendered norms and did not care what society thought of her.

Nasek Nasek describes an Indigenous tradition of gathering in the village chief's house and sowing the first seeds of paddy. However, *Nahubo* presents something that goes beyond the representation of Indigenous culture and performance of indigeneity. It addresses universal feelings and emotions. The Bangalee nationalist

Bangalee audience not to mock his native language. He reflected on his experience of learning Hajong as a first language and then getting exposed to the fact that the state language of his country was different, and it was Bangla. He described his experience of mainly speaking Bangla in his day-to-day life. He claimed, "I am also Bangalee, Bangladeshi." He lamented the fact that the Hajong language does not have an alphabet or a written form. Through his songs, as he mentioned, he tried to preserve the Hajong language. *Nahubo* is an artistic creation through which he pays tribute to both the Hajong language and the diverse cultures and traditions in Bangladesh.

Animes' now-deleted post also stated, "...we [the Hajong community] know we are Bangalee," which made Indigenous communities deeply uncomfortable. His statements inadvertently exposed the systematic oppression and tremendous pressure that force Indigenous communities to mask their Indigenous identities and subscribe to the hegemonic "Bangaleeness." An Indigenous person must learn how to perform "Bangaleeness" as best as possible to be accepted in the mainstream community and to climb the ladder of professional success.



VISUAL: STAR

Studio Bangla was named after the Bangla language. It did not frame itself as Coke Studio Bangladesh. The focus on the language, on the one hand, offered the scope to invite guest artists from India and other countries. On the other hand, it strengthened the long-standing hegemony of Bangla that has historically subsided at least 44 languages spoken by various Indigenous and minoritised communities across the country.

Coke Studio Bangla devised an innovative response to the critique of the "Bangla" vs "Bangladesh" debate. Its first song, *Nasek Nasek*, featured the talented young, rising singer Animes Roy, who sang an original song written in his native Hajong language. Animes was accompanied by Pantha Kanai, who sang *Dol Dol Duluni* – a legendary Bangla folk song written and composed by Abdul Latif, who was also the initial composer of *Amar Bhaiyer Rokte Rangano Ekushey February*. Such a creative hybrid, which upheld the Bangalee tradition as well as gave recognition to the country's Indigenous tradition, unsurprisingly won love from all fronts.

It was interesting to see how the liberal Bangalee nationalist sentiment was happy to see a tokenistic, somewhat strategic representation of indigeneity in *Nasek Nasek*. This nationalist sentiment can accept indigeneity only to a certain extent, however.

It appreciated an Indigenous performance when it appeared in a non-threatening way, in combination with a traditional Bangla folk song. The tokenistic representation of indigeneity was needed to appease the "feel-good" liberal Bangalee nationalist sentiment against the backdrop of a painful national history of using token solidarity in the name of upholding diversity, harmony, and inclusivity since the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Accord was signed in 1997. The meaningful implementation of the CHT Accord is yet to come to fruition.

When Indigenous music appeared for the second time in the second season of Coke Studio Bangla through *Nahubo*,

sentiment appreciated an Indigenous performance as long as it performed indigeneity. When the Indigenous performance tried to play the "universal," the Bangalee nationalist sentiment got deeply uncomfortable.

Some raised concerns about the "discomfort" of having to read subtitles to understand a song from Coke Studio Bangla. Their underlying assumption was that Coke Studio Bangla would always feature songs in Bangla that would be easily comprehensible to standard Bangla speakers. Interestingly, Coke Studio's *Murir Tin* featured three different dialects and languages from Chattogram, Sylhet, and Khulna regions. People who were not familiar with these had to read the subtitles to understand the lyrics. Why did the complaint about having to read subtitles not arise after *Murir Tin* was released, and why did the subtitles make people uncomfortable specifically in the case of *Nahubo*? Is it because *Murir Tin* featured three cis-male Bangalee singers – two of whom performed Bangla rap in a hypermasculine style, and who did not threaten the hegemonic Bangalee nationalist sentiment?

The liberal Bangalee nationalist sentiment did not find it objectionable when Animes was performing as part of a group in *Prarthana* and singing *Nurer Putula Baba Maulana*, or when he sang *Ora Amar Mukher Kotha Kaira Nite Chay* as part of a group in *Hey Samalo*. A Hajong native singer subscribing to the spiritual or Bangalee nationalist performance, in fact, affirmed the dominance of Bangalee nationalism. Animes was a "good Indigenous person" to both the Bangalee and Indigenous communities because, until then, he fulfilled the need for token representation by the Bangalee community and the much-needed representation for Indigenous communities. Both Bangalee and Indigenous nationalist sentiments felt threatened when Animes claimed Indigenous and Bangalee traditions in a recent Facebook post (which is not available anymore).

In his post, Animes urged the

Nahubo and its singer Animes faced backlashes from two fronts. On the one hand, some Bangalee listeners threw a sea of racist and nationalist remarks at *Nahubo* on social media because they could not accept an Indigenous performance from an Indigenous singer. On the other hand, Animes' Facebook status attracted critics from some Indigenous communities who blamed him for claiming his "Bangalee" identity and for not recognising Indigenous struggles for self-determination. Since Animes became one of the very few Indigenous celebrities in Bangladesh, he suddenly turned into an object of extreme scrutiny by both communities. The huge burden of representing Indigenous traditions and upholding Indigenous struggles fell on his shoulders. Animes no longer remained a "good Indigenous person" as he could not fulfil the expectations of both Bangalee and Indigenous communities.

The reactions Animes received expose our deep discomfort with hyphenated, mixed, and complicated identities and experiences. We love to put people in rigid boxes without any space for hybridity. Why did Coke Studio Bangla describe Animes as a "Hajong rockstar" when his major area of specialisation is Bangla folk songs? Why did Animes have to feel the pressure to declare that he was also Bangalee? Animes grew up in the Hajong community, but he also learnt Bangla and was immersed in the Bangalee culture from an early age. It is perfectly natural that Animes will go back and forth between his Hajong and other identities, and that he will code-switch as needed. Why do the nationalist sentiments get upset when their strict borders and boundaries are challenged by someone like Animes and his performance?

Perhaps it's time to rethink how we can go beyond our nationalist sentiments and celebrate hyphenated identities, hybrid experiences, and complex struggles.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Sleeve end
5 Tibetan monks
10 "The Tempest" sprite
12 Silly
13 Engaged in parliamentary procedure
15 Finish
16 Fellow
17 "My country – of thee"
18 Calmed down
20 Walking stick
21 Paris river
22 Wallops
23 Long look
25 Cavalry base
28 Artist inspirers
31 Major work
32 Main dish
34 Free (of) charge
5 Serengeti cat
6 Termite's kin
7 Rum drink
8 Sprinkle with oil
9 Detects
11 Bemoan
14 Was sloppy
19 Rosters
20 Heart's place
24 Prologues
25 Arrangement
26 Heroin, e.g.
27 Boat steerer
29 Gofers' job
30 Handles
33 Old anesthetic
35 Baby's call
38 Corn unit
39 Asian language



MONDAY'S ANSWERS

