

# 'I have dedicated my life to instilling the values of our Liberation war in Youths'

An exclusive interview with Nasir Uddin Yousuff



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

**Nasir Uddin Yousuff mentioned that although he would love to make more films, probably three or four more in his lifetime, his sole concentration and love will always be with theatre. The director plans to produce a play on Selim Al Deen's text this upcoming August, commemorating Selim's 75th birth anniversary, through Dhaka Theatre.**

DOWEL BISWAS

There are only a few cultural personalities as prolific as Nasir Uddin Yousuff Bachchu, our eternal pride, and a valiant freedom fighter who solidified his name as a cultural icon, theatre activist, filmmaker and bold cultural voice since the independence in 1971.

The *Guerilla*-famed director recently took an exemplary initiative by successfully arranging the inaugural two-day International Disability Art Festival 2024 (April 26-27) through his founding theatre troupe, Dhaka Theatre and the British Council.

In an exclusive interview with The Daily Star, the eminent artiste talked about his Liberation War days, our independence, theatre activism, his upcoming film projects, and more.

Inspired by Bangabandhu's ideals, as just a student, Nasir Uddin Yousuff threw himself into the Liberation War to free the country in 1971. Risking his life on the battlefield, he returned with an invaluable gift for the country — a much cherished, eternal independence.

"I was about to turn 21 when the war began, reaching the age of rebellion through it. The student movements of the 1960s were crucial. During that time, two major movements were happening in Bangladesh: a cultural movement and the nationalist movement," said Nasir Uddin, reminiscing his earliest days of political and cultural activism.

"The song *Amar Bhaïyer Rokte Rangano Ekushey February* deeply influenced youths like us. It kind of sparked the nationalist movement and started a revolution to seek a sovereign state and unique cultural identity," he recalled.

"By banning Rabindranath's songs, Ayub Khan merged culture and politics and as very cultural beings, we couldn't let it happen. Leaders like Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur

Rahman and Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani made it a primary issue, beginning the Bengali nation's journey of its own identity as a nation. We grew up with slogans and songs shaping our upbringing. Therefore, it was obvious that we would revolt against the oppressors," said the war hero, who was also a member of the valiant Crack Platoon in the Liberation War of 1971.

"As intriguing as it is, both Bangabandhu and Maulana Bhashani used to recite poetry during political speeches. Our cultural aspirations drove us toward nationalism. Bangabandhu's six-point movement and the mass uprising of 1969 saw millions demanding independence and democracy, inspiring us," the artiste explained.

"The state should remain in the spirit of the Liberation War, embodying consciousness and humanity. It should be for all people, not just Bengalis or Muslims. This was the essence of our struggle," he stated.

"After our independence, in 1972, Mamunur Rashid and Kabir Anwar formed Parapar Natya Goshthi, along with Bohubachan and Aranyak, pioneering an extraordinary theatre movement through their politically correct productions," the artiste expressed.

"I used to sell tickets and set up lights for their plays, which ignited my desire to pursue theatre. In 1973, we moved to Dhaka Theatre, aiming to produce Bangladeshi plays. Influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Ionesco, and Rimbaud, we created original works," Nasir Uddin Yousuff, stated regarding his sudden inclination towards theatre.

"I was most intrigued by Selim Al Deen and Hasibul Hasan's plays, and those were the first at Dhaka Theatre. We performed at the Dhaka Sports Association auditorium, a modest venue with tin roofs. Tickets sold out in advance, and prominent poets and professors attended our

shows. Bichitra magazine featured our theatre group in 1973. You can say that kind of made me a theatre practitioner by heart."

The thespian, who directed legendary plays like *Kitton Kholo* (1981), *Keramot Mongol* (1985), *Hat Hadai* (1989), *Joiboti Kannyar Mon* (1995), and *Bono Pangshul* (1998), is occupied with numerous theatre and film projects up his sleeve. "I plan to direct at least one play and one cinema per year," he said with a polite grin as he feels that he is too busy with social activism nowadays.

"The concentration of my cinema, theatre, drama and no matter what kind of projects I take on, will always be centred on either our Language Movement or the Liberation War. This is not just because I am a freedom fighter and I love my country and people, rather it is because we have to remember, highlight and showcase our struggles as a nation to inspire the younger generation. We have to make them understand where we came from, only then true cultural development is possible," said the cultural icon.

Nasir Uddin Yousuff mentioned that although he would love to make more films, probably three or four more in his lifetime, his sole concentration and love will always be with theatre. The director plans to produce a play on Selim Al Deen's text this upcoming August, commemorating Selim's 75th birth anniversary, through Dhaka Theatre.

Planning to patronise the Group Theatre Movement in the villages of Bangladesh, the artiste concluded that he wants to make a film based on the Language Movement of 1952 and his favourite discourse, the Liberation War, stating, "You see, the war was a dream for us, a dream of an independent, sovereign country. We have to imbue the spirit of the Liberation War within our younger generation, and I will keep doing just that in my lifetime."

## 'Pushpa 2' to hit Bangladeshi screens in Hindi



In recent years, South Indian cinema has gained significant global traction. In 2021, director Sukumar's all-India film *Pushpa: The Rise* debuted, captivating audiences worldwide.

The sequel, *Pushpa: The Rule - Part 2*, slated for a global release on August 15, boasts a larger budget and more elaborate production than its predecessor.

Meanwhile, Anonno Mamun, head of Action Cut Entertainment, has finalised talks with the Indian distributor to bring *Pushpa 2* to Bangladeshi theatres.

The movie will be released here in Hindi, not Bengali, due to an existing policy against screening of foreign films dubbed in Bengali.

Mamun cited limited interest in Bengali-dubbed films and widespread understanding of Hindi, amongst audience, as additional reasons.

## Raindance Film Festival to screen a Bangladeshi film



Raindance Film Festival, renowned for independent cinema, will screen Bangladeshi short film *Death and Landscape* in its 32nd edition.

Directed by Fuaduzzaman Fuad, this film will make its international premiere in London on June 27.

The film, co-produced by Mahfuz Nazim Mapel, features creative consultancy from film critic and journalist Sadia Khalid Reeti.

The lead role is played by Suzana Payel Sushmita, with Manjurul Islam Akash as executive producer and cinematography by Zarif Ahmed and Asif Uddin.

# NEWS

## Bangladesh categorised as country 'in crisis' Where horror abounds

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The worst ranking country is North Korea's.

Bangladesh's freedom of expression has been considered to be in a state of crisis since 2014 by this ranking, said Sheikh Manjur-e-Alam, regional director of Article 19 South Asia, while presenting the findings at a press briefing at Hotel Lakeshore Heights in the capital.

"In 2000, Bangladesh was considered to be a country whose freedom of expression is 'less restricted'. Then in 2006, it first dropped in ranking to become 'highly restricted'. Since then it has been on a downwards trend."

The report takes into account 25 indicators related to freedom of expression, digital rights, personal and political independence, political participation, civic participation, and media freedom.

When comparing Bangladesh's scores for different indicators, one of the areas it has performed worst in over the years is freedom from government social media monitoring and government social media censorship.

Other indicators that affected the country's scores include arrests for

political content, lack of freedom of peaceful assembly, and lack of freedom of academic exchange and expression.

Also faring poorly were the scores in media self-censorship and government censorship of journalists.

"Since 2007, Bangladesh's scores in keeping journalists free from harassment has been negative," said Alam.

The country has shown improvement in reducing political killings and in freedom of religion.

To rank different countries, the index asks questions like whether the government represses civil society organisations, whether it blocks access to certain websites, or censors social media, and whether it has institutions to monitor online content.

The index also assesses how comprehensive the surveillance of political content in social media by the government is.

Speaking at the press briefing, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh Itekhazuzzaman said Bangladesh got independence only because of the freedom of expression.

"The current situation was never

ever expected 53 years ago, even in dreams ... Freedom of expression is now a hostage of power politics. There is surveillance in social media posts, ban on political programmes, political killings have not stopped yet, and [there is] self-censorship. [All these] brings Bangladesh at the bottom of the list."

Prothom Alo Joint Editor Sohrab Hasan said if good terms exist between a government and the people, there is no need for acts like CSA or DSA.

"Whenever the government starts fearing the people, they try to control them with various rules and regulations... Until the culture of fear is removed, freedom of expression will be at stake."

Syeda Rizwana Hasan, chief executive of the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association, said, "The published report did not surprise me. To overcome the situation, the government must heed the voices of civil society. To improve our image, we must engage in dialogue and work with everyone rather than distancing ourselves. For speaking the truth, there should be no punishment; instead, we should consider it and find ways to make corrections."

## France, Belgium

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air bombardments, residents said, while Israeli air strikes killed at least five people in the southern city of Rafah.

Simultaneous Israeli assaults on the northern and southern edges of the Gaza Strip this month have caused a new exodus of hundreds of thousands of people fleeing their homes, and sharply restricted the flow of aid, raising the risk of famine.

The UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) said yesterday that food distribution in Rafah were currently suspended due to lack of supplies and insecurity.

At least 35,647 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's offensive in Gaza, according to the enclave's health ministry yesterday. The toll includes 85 deaths over the past 24 hours, a ministry statement said. At least 10,000 others are missing and believed to be trapped under destroyed buildings, it said.

In Jabalia, a sprawling refugee camp built for displaced civilians 75 years ago, the Israeli army used bulldozers to clear shops and property near the local market, residents said, in a military operation that began almost two weeks ago.

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to use it without an operator present.

Only patients using trolleys and wheelchairs along with three other people, including the liftman, can use the lift at a time.

Several accidents took place in the past years, and a female patient died while being stuck in the lift on March 23, 2014.

"I work while constantly scared that I might die," Shipon said. Fazlul Haq, a food staffer at Mitford, said a tragic accident that resulted in the death of a colleague has left him traumatised.

"On June 3, 2021, my colleague Sumon and I were going from floor to floor to distribute food to the patients. We had gotten on the lift to go to the second floor. In the absence of the operator, Sumon pressed a button. The moment he touched it, he got electrocuted and died on the spot. "I haven't been able to use the lift since then."

Not only at Mitford, but lifts at many government hospitals in the capital have become risky to use as incidents like patients and attendants getting stuck inside are rampant. Many of the lifts are overused and carry more than their capacity.

The Daily Star visited 13 major state-run hospitals in the capital and found that complaints of lifts malfunctioning are common. Some of them make loud noises at times, some get stuck or have doors that malfunction, remaining either permanently open or failing to reopen once closed.

The issue of lifts in dilapidated conditions came to the fore after a heart patient died while being stuck in a lift at Shaheed Tajuddin Medical College in Gazipur on May 12.

The incident prompted the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) to issue a five-point directive, which includes ensuring uninterrupted power supply in all healthcare facilities, checking the presence of lift operators and reassessing their qualification, inspecting lift's safety system, and sending a letter to the Power Board of Bangladesh to inspect all lifts of all healthcare facilities.

However, the scenario at the city hospitals remains unsatisfactory.

The National Institute of Cancer Research & Hospital in Mohakhali has eight lifts in its two buildings. All of them malfunction frequently.

"The lift condition is so bad that anyone can easily open the door using their hands, which poses a risk of

accidents," said Aminul Islam, a lift operator.

He described the lift failures as a daily occurrence due to overheating caused by overuse.

The authorities keep three lifts of a seven storey building closed from 2:00pm for what they claimed was a lack of users, further limiting accessibility for patients and staffers.

A tragic incident on September 17, 2022, underscored the dangers posed by these lifts, as a 60-year-old cancer patient fell to her death from the ninth floor through a lift shaft.

Meanwhile in Dhaka Medical College Hospital, at least seven lifts remain consistently overloaded with patients and their relatives, posing serious risks to the safety of those relying on them to move around the hospital.

Shakil Mahmud, a lift operator at DMCH, said each lift operates under high pressure from the sheer number of users.

"Sometimes, it gets so crowded that we have to force people to get off. But most of the time people stay back, ignoring the risks."

Due to the heavy usage, the hospital authorities close the operation of each lift for four hours by rotation.

Samad Azad, deputy assistant engineer of PWD at DMCH, said the lifts are malfunctioning frequently due to overload.

During a recent night-time visit to the National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation (NITOR), and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), this correspondent found no liftman. As a result, many of the patients were using lifts without knowing how to.

"I don't know how to use the lift, which makes it very difficult for me..." said a patient at NITOR, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Another patient named Alal Uddin expressed his fear of using the lift without an operator.

"I am very afraid to enter the lift as there are no operators here. This is the first time I am using it, which makes it scarier for me."

Nurjahan Begum, a staffer at BSMMU's block-C, told The Daily Star, "I was never afraid to use lifts. But ten years ago, an accident prompted me to be more cautious while using it."

"Ten years ago, a nurse was going from the ground floor to an upper floor. Suddenly, the lift malfunctioned and stopped. The nurse was frightened. The lift then rapidly descended to the ground floor, causing the people inside

to panic. When hit the ground floor, the nurse's leg was severely injured," she said, adding that the accident could have been more severe.

"Since then, I have been afraid to use the lift. I only use it when absolutely necessary, like when I am accompanying a patient."

The situation at other major hospitals, including Bangladesh Shishu Hospital and Institute, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases, Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College and Hospital, and the National Institute of Neuro Sciences & Hospital, mirrors this grim reality.

Frequent lift problems and the absence of operators after evening hours force patients to operate these dangerous lifts on their own.

On March 31, Health Minister Dr Samanta Lal Sen got stuck in an elevator at the National Institute of Neurosciences & Hospital.

The investigation committee yesterday found negligence in elevator maintenance and a lack of operator training related to the incident.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Moinul Ahsan, director of hospitals at DGHS, said that 24-hour lift usage in some hospitals sometimes leads to problems.

"The lift is meant for patients only, but unnecessary use by others can lead to such accidents. Sometimes the lift gets overloaded due to too many people. This should be avoided."

He said that DGHS took the decision to issue the directives at an emergency meeting, with the participation of the heads of all government healthcare institutions across the country, regarding the overall management of the hospital, including emergency services, lifts and service management.

## Tigers start USA tour

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for Bangladesh with two wickets but he went for 41 off his four overs, including 32 off the last two.

Earlier, Towhid Hridoy (58 off 47) scored his second half-century in the format to drive the visitors to 153 for six after being asked to bat first.

Mahmudullah Riyad scored a 22-ball 31 but the top-order failed yet again with Liton Das (14), Soumya Sarkar (20) and skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto (3) failing to make much of an impact in an underwhelming batting effort.

The two sides will meet again tomorrow and on Saturday in the two remaining matches of the series.