

Struggle for a secular Bangladesh will persist: ASHFAQUE NIPUN

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SADI MUHAMMAD ALOK and SHARIF M SHAFIQ

When it comes to speaking out against injustice and oppression, there aren't many artistes who stand out as prominently as Ashfaque Nipun. Known for his active presence both online and on the ground, Nipun has been a vocal participant in various protests. His determination was evident during the quota reform movement, which later evolved into the anti-discrimination student movement and led to the dramatic fall of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina's regime.

Why is political consciousness important for an artiste, and to what extent?

I believe neither the general public nor artistes can exist outside of politics. Whether you're a creator or a writer, your work reflects the socio-political reality around you.

However, not all artistes possess political consciousness, and I don't believe in imposing it on anyone. If a person's conscience doesn't awaken after witnessing the injustices and oppression around them, no amount of education or knowledge can instill it. It depends on an individual's sensitivity.

For creators, the biggest advantage is that their movies or web-series can reach a large audience. If the work reflects political or socio-economic realities, it resonates more deeply with people, which is exciting for us as creators. That said, there's a distinction between activism and art. If cinema becomes too politically charged, it ceases to be art. Great artistes strike a balance between the two.

How do you view an artiste's political engagement, especially when politics influences art?

Let me clarify: I strongly believe in an artiste's freedom of expression. If someone wants to create propaganda-based cinema, that's their right. The audience will decide whether to accept, reject, or hold the creator accountable

for it, and we must allow time to take its course.

If someone chooses to make a film against oppressive forces, they also have that freedom. However, they must be prepared to face the risks and accountability that come with it. Similarly, those who create propaganda-based cinema must accept the consequences if their work doesn't stand the test of time.

Personally, I think it's detrimental when those in power try to influence art, and artistes should resist such influence. This has happened not only during the former government's regime but also before. Governments often use artistes as mouthpieces because of their widespread acceptance.

Recent events show how the audience has discarded those who were comfortable during the previous government's tenure and who were associated with government propaganda. These artistes must now take accountability for their actions.

How do you perceive 'Mohanagar' as a viewer?

It's challenging for me to comment on *Mohanagar* purely as a viewer since I created the plot and characters.

This work addresses issues like police and state-sponsored oppression. As a creator, my goal was to bring these topics to light. Instead of analysing it from a viewer's perspective, I think it's more important to consider how the audience has related to it. People are interpreting *Mohanagar* in a certain way now, but their perceptions might change over the next 10 years. Ultimately, we must leave it to time.

We've heard about harassment related to works like 'Mohanagar'. Did any actors or artistes hesitate to join the project when you pitched the web-series?

When discussing the story, no one refused to work on it. I was able to make it with everyone I had initially thought of. The same goes for *Mohanagar 2*. In this regard, I am very fortunate. From



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

the actors to the producers and the entire cast and crew, everyone worked diligently on the production.

However, it wasn't just me; the actors also faced harassment for their involvement in *Mohanagar*. Yet, none of them refused to work on the sequel. Instead, everyone worked with even greater passion. The OTT platform associated with the project also fully supported us.

The iconic character of OC Harun in 'Mohanagar' was played by Mosharrarf Karim. What made you think of him

for this role?

When I first conceived the story of *Mohanagar*, I couldn't imagine anyone else for the role of OC Harun other than Mosharrarf Karim. This character is not a simple one; there's a duality in him. He might say one thing but think another. OC Harun is neither rigid nor plain and boring; he has a great sense of humour. Overall, I felt no one else would be more suitable for the role.

After the student-led mass uprising, we now have a new form of Bangladesh, and state reform is

underway. Do you think there might be communal pressure on art in the future?

As artistes, we have always spoken for a secular Bangladesh. The threat of communalism has been present for over 50 years. Regardless of which government comes into power, this struggle for a non-communal Bangladesh has always been there. We've seen the rise of JMB in 2001 and the attack on Chhayanaut. But we fought back, and this struggle will never end; it will always persist.

There's been discussion and criticism about artistes taking sides in movements. Some are accused of being opportunistic, speaking out in favour only after the determined fact. How do you view this?

This can be seen in two ways. First, someone might have been a beneficiary of the government before, but after witnessing the overall situation, their conscience may have awakened. Seeing the atrocities, they might no longer hold their previous position. Secondly, when they see the situation changing, they quickly jump off the boat and try to reach the shore.

People look up to the artiste community. Many are influenced and inspired by them. I would say the audience needs to understand which artistes speak for the people and which speak for power. The audience will decide this, and the youth understand it too. Where an artiste should speak for the masses but instead speak for power, the audience will reject them. This has become even clearer in this movement.

You can't fool people. The people of this country weren't waiting for an artiste's call to take to the streets. They went out on their own without waiting for a call from their favourite artiste or idol. From this, the artiste community should learn that if you stand with the people, they will stand with you; otherwise, they will cast you aside.

Translated by Mahiya Tabassum.

NEWS

Govt to form

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the identities of its administrators, and those responsible for establishing them.

In a press release, the NHRC yesterday said that The Daily Star's August 21 report titled "Inside the Aynagar," along with similar reports from various media outlets, has drawn its attention.

The NHRC expressed serious concerns and has taken suo moto (self-initiated) action, calling for comprehensive information about the Aynagar.

According to the reports, these secret detention cells held victims of enforced disappearance for days, months and even years in inhuman conditions during Sheikh Hasina's 16 year regime. These facilities are notorious for their complete isolation, with detainees unable to see any light from the outside world.

The NHRC requested the senior secretary of the Ministry of Home Affairs to provide details regarding the current status of the Aynagar, its administrators, the identities and numbers of those detained, the legal grounds for their detention, and those responsible for establishing the cells, according to the press release.

The deadline for submitting the report has been set for September 25.

"In a democratic state, the physical and mental torture inflicted over the years in the 'Aynagar' is seen by the Commission as a severe violation of both constitutional and legal norms, as well as human rights. The damage caused to detainees due to indefinite detention is irreparable, and they are entitled to compensation," the NHRC said.

The notice states that the commission can only request reports from the government concerning allegations of disappearances or abductions by law enforcement agencies, whether initiated suo moto or based on complaints.

Due to the limitations of Section 18 of the National Human Rights Commission Act, 2009, the Commission cannot conduct its own investigations and must rely on government reports, which can sometimes take years to receive, it said.

The commission believes that this legal limitation leaves it in a helpless position and requires urgent reform.

Salman F Rahman

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millions of taka by showing fake expenses in various sectors. Shahab also took bribes between Tk 80 lakh and Tk 90 lakh for transferring each forest officer, the complaint said.

He issued DoE certificates to various factories that pollute the environment with liquid waste and did not have the factories' effluent treatment plants inspected.

The documents said he took Tk 7 crore to sign a resolution of land which forced the then chairman of Bangladesh Forest Industries Development Corporation (BFIDC) to hand over a piece of land to the Climate Change Trust.

Shaon, former lawmaker from Bhol-3, is alleged to have amassed illegal wealth by misusing his power.

According to the complaint, he misappropriated funds from various projects in Lalmoan and Tazumuddin upazilas in 2021-2022 fiscal year. He embezzled Tk 6 crore, 260.39 tonnes of wheat, and 234.33 tonnes of rice allocated for Kabikha (Food for Work) and Kabita (Money for Work) programmes.

The anti-graft body also decided to investigate corruption allegations against former state ministers Nasrul and Palak.

TRAVEL BAN

The ACC yesterday sought travel



Shahab Uddin



Zunaid Ahmed Palak

bans on Harun or Rashid, former DB chief (Dhaka Metropolitan Police), and his wife Shireen Akter. The ACC wrote to the Special Branch of police to this end.

The decision came after the anti-graft body decided to probe allegations against him of acquiring crores of taka through various irregularities.

Meanwhile, a Dhaka court yesterday issued a 60-day travel ban on Taqsem A Khan, the former managing director of Dhaka Wasa, in connection with graft allegations brought against him.

ACC Public Prosecutor Mahmud Hossain Jahangir moved the petition. In the application, Jahangir said Taqsem was trying to flee the country. So, a travel ban is needed to prevent him from leaving the country.

UN team arrives in Dhaka

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and whoever they need," the UN official said.

The mission will need six to eight weeks for the investigation and then it will submit a report, including recommendations for reforming security sector.

According to a primary UN report published on August 16, 650 people were killed in Bangladesh between July 16 and August 11 during the student-led protests and after the fall of the Awami League regime on August 5.

The reported death toll is likely an underestimation, as information collection has been hindered by restrictions on movement due to the curfew and the internet shutdown, it said.

The UN said the number of reported killings in revenge attacks since August 5 still remains to be determined. Those killed include protesters, bystanders, journalists covering the events and a number of members of the security forces.

A new reality for Hasina in India

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to Bangladesh, choosing anonymity, told this newspaper that regardless of the law, the decision on whether or not Hasina will be extradited will ultimately be a "political call".

"The question to be answered is how strong are economic linkages between India and Bangladesh are, which will ensure that Hasina does not hang like an albatross by the neck of bilateral ties for the bigger interests of both countries," the career diplomat said.

Professor Sreeradha Dutta, a professor of international affairs at the OP Jindal Global University in India who has a long track record of research on Bangladeshi democracy, said that extradition will neither be an easy nor a quick process.

"Bangladesh can request extradition, but I believe it will become a long-drawn judicial process. Even if Bangladesh revokes her passport, that might have no implication for India. India will question the decision and its legitimacy," said Professor Dutta.

"Since a government politically opposed to Sheikh Hasina is the one prosecuting her, it might be perceived that she is fleeing political persecution and a threat to life. We have a history of looking after our friends," she added.

Another Indian diplomat who had worked in Dhaka in the 1990s said the dilemma for India is that while it needs to maintain ties with whoever holds the reins of power in Bangladesh, at the same time it should not be seen as abandoning a long-standing friend like Hasina.

There are enough linkages between the economies of Bangladesh and India to guard against any tectonic shift in the relations between the two countries, he added.

Foreign Affairs Adviser Mohammad Touhid, in an interview with Reuters on August 16, said if the country's home and law ministries decide, "we have to ask for her ... return to Bangladesh".

Responding to a question about the status of Hasina's stay in India, India's External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson, Randhir Jaiswal, told

a media briefing on August 16 that her entry into India was granted on short notice.

"Extradition and other such issues are consular matters that are discussed regularly at the consular level. I will update you on any new developments regarding this matter," he said.

INDIA'S HISTORY OF GRANTING ASYLUM

Sheikh Hasina had previously sought and obtained political asylum from India in 1975 after the assassination of her father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15. Hasina and Rehana escaped the bloodshed as they were in then West Germany.

Before being granted political asylum, they had taken refuge in the home of Bangladesh's ambassador to West Germany. Hasina returned to Dhaka on May 17, 1981, from India.

India is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol.

But India has given shelter to many Pakistani refugees since 1947, while a huge number of refugees from Tibet came to India when Dalai Lama and his followers were being persecuted by Chinese authorities in 1959.

Many Bangladeshi refugees settled in Kolkata during the Liberation War in 1971, while many Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka settled in Tamil Nadu in 1980.

In 2022, Rohingya refugees from Myanmar fled to India, and India has been providing shelter to many, although without any strategy for refugees.

According to BBC Bangla reports, in 1975, Krishak Sramik Janata League President Abdul Kader Siddique took political shelter in India, while in 1959 the Indian government provided asylum to Dalai Lama and his followers.

Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai, former president of Afghanistan, had to resign in 1992 and sought asylum in India, which was promptly granted.

In 2013, former Maldivian president Mohamed Nasheed was granted political refuge in the Indian High Commission in Male, while

the former king of Nepal, Maharaja Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah, along with his family members, took refuge status in India in 1950.

HASINA'S EXIT NOT ONE-OFF

Before thousands of people stormed her official residence, Hasina was flown to Hindon Airbase in Ghaziabad by a military aircraft on August 5.

At the time, she was no longer the prime minister of Bangladesh, as per the statements of Army Chief General Waker Uz Zaman, who announced to the nation that Hasina had resigned prior to her departure.

After landing at Hindon airbase, Hasina was transported to a safe house of paramilitary provided by the Indian government in Noida, Uttarakhnad province, at an unspecified date, according to sources.

The nature of Hasina's departure was not unique; other heads of state have recently set similar precedents in neighbouring countries.

The events that transpired in Bangladesh on August 5 bore striking similarities to those that occurred in Sri Lanka in July 2022 when former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa and prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksa were ousted following a mass movement.

After his fall, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, his wife, and two bodyguards fled to the Maldives by a military jet, and then he reportedly fled to Singapore.

The former Thailand prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra was ousted by a military coup in 2006 and exiled to Dubai for 15 years, dodging an eight-year prison sentence for corruption and abuse of power.

He returned to Bangkok for the first time in 15 years in August 2023 and was taken into custody and sentenced by the Supreme Court to eight years in prison. His eight-year sentence was later commuted to a year by King Maha Vajiralongkorn in September last year. Thaksin Shinawatra received a royal pardon last week after his daughter, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, 37, was elected as Thailand's prime minister.