

The dual faces of mental health disorders in local films

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The intrinsically intricate nooks and crannies of the realities of living with mental health disorders can very well be deemed as being only ever harsher than those represented in media. Even the churning and voicing of these complexities via books or writing can only do so much to make people perceive mental health disorders for what they are. However, when push comes to shove, representations of psychological disorders in any form can mean a further step taken to bring awareness to them – and Bangladeshi projects seem to have touched upon two rather specific ways to represent them.

As of late, especially with the reign of OTT platforms, our industry and its creative counterparts are increasingly moving towards the direction of crafting thrilling and adventurous projects rooted in realism. The creation of awareness surrounding mental health ordeals is naturally bound to become a concept worth diving headfirst into considering 18.17% of adults in Bangladesh experience mental health issues.

Among this percentage, depression, anxiety, and somatisation disorders account for 13.9%, making them the most common psychological problems, according to a report shared by Clinical Neuropsychologist Dr Shahanur Hossain during a seminar organised by Dhaka University's Department of Clinical Psychology and the Bangladesh Clinical Psychology Society (BCPS) to mark World Mental Health Day this year. The depiction of a good culmination of mental health disorders can add to showcasing people nationwide the unrelenting possibility of never giving in to the fatalistic call of the likes of depression and other damning psychological disorders exhibiting symptoms similar to depression.

The shunning and shaming of individuals, particularly women, without “normal” behavioural



qualities, in our modern world today, get acknowledged as “pagol” (mad) by the masses. As per the historical conduct towards people who aren't “normal”, not many take the responsibility of those who need help. Nevertheless, the loss of life due to depression or other intolerant illnesses is one that affects a lot more people thereby inducing them into guilt-tripping.

In Robiul Alam Robi's web-film *Forget Me Not*, Fahim (Yash Rohan) is a prime example of a person thrashing and retching in agony internally, only to never explicitly convey the depths of his hurt to anyone. He does not even take any action that could've been suspected due to his mental illness before he kills himself. It is only when Aurthee (Mehazabien Chowdhury), pokes around for the truth, after his demise, that his mother reveals he was indeed suffering and tried to commit suicide once before.

The film is a reminder to pay special attention to someone you know is going through a hard and it does a good job of representing the emotional turmoil within those who are most affected after a person takes his own life. The film ends on a satisfactory note as Aurthee comes to terms with facing reality in a peaceful way of her own, which has the potential to offer strength to a similarly affected viewer.

Vicky Zahed's *Tithidhor*, another drama starring Mehazabien as the central character who suffers from depression, is also one that ends on a hopeful note. It illustrates the story of Nishat in her 30s who gets pushed to the edge of her mental and emotional due to various unpleasant experiences, and her anger and frustration with life and living become more pronounced with time. Ironically, she finds meaning in life after seeing a little girl succumbing to the deadly cruelty of an unfortunate disease.

The drama ends on a pleasant note with Nishat enjoying her own company carefreely in the process of finding herself again. The inspiring climax is something that more local projects fail to follow through.

A troupe that our industry falls into when creating mental health related projects is the enmeshing of a realistic problem with supernatural factors. Films like *Jahan* and *Tithir Oshukh* delve into hallucinations to paint the consequences of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and schizophrenia, respectively. The projects feel the need to bring up generic distasteful social biases against women.

Jahan (Nazia Haque Orsha) is easily termed “pagol” by anyone who interacts with her. She lives with the debilitating truth of having killed her bedridden mother and gets arrested for a murder she didn't commit but she definitely thinks she did.

On the other hand, Tithi (Tasnia

Farin) after being abused while growing up and even through her first marriage becomes wretched mentally. Her second and devoted husband's action of murdering all those who had once made her miserable does not help her case either.

Jahan gets the statement, “You should get yourself a kid, then keep yourself busy,” thrown at her. In contrast, Tithi's second husband (Yash Rohan) gets the, “Who would have married an abused and divorced woman like her if not for you?” – further exacerbating the treatment towards women with psychological disorders, even to this day.

These projects also end on morose notes but the focus on awareness surrounding mental health disorders is derailed to make room for the supernatural suspenseful elements which in hindsight does not do much for challenges associated with disorders.

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Widespread graft was the norm

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“Megaprojects were undertaken right and left without any objective cost-benefit analysis,” said Jahan.

Secondly, he said, the framework of transparency and accountability was thrown away. “In the absence of transparency and accountability, wide spread corruption at all levels of economic structure became the norm, not the exception.”

“It not only represented resource leakage but also destroyed the value system of the society.”

Thirdly, proper and objective monitoring and evaluations of programmes and projects were not undertaken as needed most of the time.

So, economic decisions were ad hoc to a large extent often did not reflect the aspirations of the people. These were mainly bureaucracy-driven, non-participatory, and top-down on many occasions, not bottom-up.

Furthermore, strategies were not based on data, evaluations and facts, but sometimes on the basis of perceptions, said Jahan, who had also worked as an economic adviser at the Planning Commission.

AL BYPASSED INCLUSIVITY

The previous government's economic policies historically favoured affluent groups, providing avenues for wealth accumulation through loan defaults, tax evasion, and corruption.

This “troika” of state machinery, business interests, and wealthy elites exploited public resources without accountability, widening the gap between rich and poor, Jahan said.

About the previous government's approach to democracy, Jahan argued against putting democracy and development as mutually exclusive matters.

Democracy has intrinsic value, independent of its impact on development while the government sought to justify authoritarian practices by emphasising rapid economic growth, Jahan said.

“Democracy fosters equitable, sustainable development by ensuring transparency and accountability,” he remarked.

“Bangladesh must pursue democracy and development

simultaneously. The notion that democracy could be compromised for the sake of development is against the interests of the people,” said Jahan.

Genuine development should reflect a participatory, democratic structure to ensure that it remains inclusive and

sustainable, he added.

Bangladesh's impressive GDP growth has not translated into sufficient job creation, especially for educated youth, as Jahan explained that while the economy grew at 6 percent, the quality of this growth has been compromised.

“The focus on capital-intensive industries sidelined employment-generating sectors, resulting in jobless, voiceless, and rootless growth.”

The previous government prioritised high growth rates, bypassing the need for inclusive and environmentally sustainable growth. As a result, economic gains have not been widely shared, and the growth process has often ignored the socio-cultural fabric and environmental concerns of Bangladesh.

He contrasts “progress” with “development,” arguing that while Bangladesh achieved quantitative economic progress, it neglected qualitative development.

PERSISTING INEQUALITIES

While discussing Bangladesh's socio-economic strides, its challenges, and the pivotal steps required for sustainable development, Jahan said Bangladesh's journey from a war-torn country in 1971 to a burgeoning economy in 2023 was remarkable.

With annual GDP growth averaging nearly 6 percent between 1991 and 2023, Bangladesh's economy expanded thirteenfold, from \$35 billion to approximately \$447 billion.

The poverty rate fell drastically, from 58 percent in 1990 to 19 percent in 2023. This growth fuelled advances in health, education, and infrastructure, pushing life expectancy up from 58 years to 73 years and primary school enrolment to 97 percent.

Jahan noted that Bangladesh also outperformed its neighbours in key human development indicators. For instance, the under-five mortality rate per 1,000 live births stood at 31 in 2019, lower than India's 34 and Pakistan's 67.

Furthermore, Bangladesh's Human Development Index value jumped from 0.394 in 1990 to 0.661 in 2019. By 2015, Bangladesh attained lower middle income status, edging towards official graduation from the Least Developed Country bracket in 2026.

Despite these successes, significant deprivations linger, according to Jahan. Roughly 31 million people still lived in poverty as of 2023, and many struggled with inadequate access to essential services, such as safe drinking water and healthcare.

Economic disparities persist, with notable gaps in education, healthcare, and income, the economist said. For example, the under-five mortality rate for the poorest quintile was 49 per 1,000 live births in 2023, more than double that of the richest quintile.

Gender and regional inequalities also present challenges, with rural populations experiencing significantly higher rates of multidimensional poverty than urban residents, Jahan observed.

Bangladesh's income disparity has reached historic highs, with the top 10 percent of the population controlling 38 percent of national income, while the bottom 40 percent control only 17 percent.

Jahan identified three primary contributors to this inequality: unequal access to education and employment, affluent biases in policy, and the unchecked accumulation of wealth by powerful elites.

With three distinct education streams—public, elite private, and madrasa—from where students emerge with different skill levels and job opportunities, further entrenching inequality.

5-POINT STRATEGY

Following the political transition, the interim government faces substantial economic obstacles, including elevated inflation, decelerated industrial production, and a struggling banking sector, he said.

Although the government has tightened the monetary policy, stabilised the exchange rate, and improved remittance inflow, Jahan highlighted the importance of understanding the complex roots of these factors for effective solutions to the problems.

Tackling inflation, for example, requires more than monetary tightening; it demands addressing structural issues like syndicates controlling the supply of goods, he pointed out.

Jahan advocated for simultaneous political and economic reforms, recommending a phased, prioritised approach to reform spanning immediate, short-term, and long-term actions.

He noted that success depends on the government's capacity to withstand resistance from vested interest groups and to foster a cohesive vision for overcoming current challenges.

Looking ahead, Jahan proposed a five-point strategy for the interim

government to address inequality and drive inclusive growth.

Firstly, he recommended an objective assessment of past policies to set future directions.

Secondly, a national dialogue should engage marginalised groups, fostering a collective vision for inclusive development.

Thirdly, a rolling three-year plan should prioritise growth in sectors employing the poor.

A strategy with emphasis on the collection of disaggregated data on specific areas and groups will be needed to steer the country forward, Jahan said.

And a comprehensive social protection strategy to assist people in need will be required, according to him.

JnU students

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Speaking to The Daily Star, Sadia Sultana, a demonstrator, said, “We initially went to the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education, and we were not heard with due importance. Our delegation then went to the education ministry at the secretariat and our demands were neglected. That's why we felt compelled to block the road and stage a sit-in.”

Adviser Nahid Islam reached the area around 2:30pm and expressed solidarity with the students. Shortly afterwards, AM Aminul Islam, a special assistant (education) to the chief adviser, joined him.

Nahid said measures will be taken soon to draw up a plan for prompt construction of the dormitories on the new campus.

Around 4:00pm, an 18-member delegation, consisting 12 students and six teachers of Jagannath University, met Nahid, Aminul, and the education secretary at the secretariat.

AKM Rakib, a representative of the students, told the press, “We have given a three-day ultimatum to the government to meet our demands. A meeting has been scheduled for tomorrow [today] where the university vice-chancellor and representatives of the teachers and students will be present. We hope the government will soon provide a roadmap to handover of the construction work to the army.”

Our JnU correspondent contributed to this report.

Khaleda's 10-year jail

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arguments on the appeals.

The 79-year-old former prime minister filed the leave to appeal petitions with the Appellate Division on March 14, 2019, praying to the apex court to scrap her 10-year jail sentence in the case filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission.

Earlier, a petition was lodged by the ACC, following which the HC on October 30, 2018, scaled up the punishment.

Khaleda landed in jail on February 8, 2018, after a special court in Dhaka had sentenced her to five years in jail in the case.

While sentencing Khaleda, then special judge, Md Akhtaruzzaman, considered her age and social status.

The five other accused, including her son Tarique Rahman, were awarded 10 years' imprisonment for misappropriating over Tk 2.1 crore that had come from a foreign bank in grants for orphans.

Speaking to The Daily Star yesterday, Khaleda's lawyer Kayser Kamal, also the BNP's legal affairs secretary, said the former premier was accused in total 37 cases filed during the regimes of the former military-

backed caretaker government (2007-08) and Sheikh Hasina-led government on different charges, including corruption, violence, arson, defamation, and sedition.

Of the 37 cases, 12 were scrapped by the HC on October 30 and 31 this year. The lower courts concerned earlier dismissed nine defamation cases and the president granted clemency to Khaleda in two cases in which she was sentenced to different prison terms, said the lawyer.

The BNP chief is now on bail in the rest of the cases.

The presidential clemency was granted to Khaleda on August 6 this year, a day after Hasina resigned as prime minister and fled the country in the face of a mass uprising.

During the hearing at the Appellate Division yesterday, some pro-BNP lawyers, including Zainul Abedin, AM Mahub Uddin Khokon, Md Badrudoza Badal, Nasir Uddin Ahmed Ahism, Kayser Kamal, and Md Ruhul Quddus Kazal appeared for Khaleda, while Attorney General Md Asaduzzaman and lawyer Md Ashif Hassan represented the state and the ACC respectively.

Afghans ace the chase

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South Africa.

to bring their side back on track.

Stand-in skipper Mehedi Hasan Miraz got Gurbaz caught at deep square-leg before debutant pacer Nahid Rana, who was the most impressive bowler for Bangladesh on the day with 2-40, removed Gulbadin Naib (one) to give Bangladesh hope of a late lightbulb.

However, Omarzai and Mohammad Nabi battled sensibly to take Afghanistan to the target with 10 balls to spare and complete their second successive ODI series win against Bangladesh.

Omarzai, who remained unbeaten on 70 off 77 balls, smashed pacer Shoriful Islam over long-on for a six to complete the run chase in style as the all-rounder, later adjudged the player of the match, punched the the air in celebration.

Nabi, the player of the series, remained not out on 34 off 27 balls to guide Afghanistan to a third consecutive series victory in this format after wins against Ireland and

Earlier, Bangladesh, who slipped to 72-4 in the 15th over from 53-0 after winning the toss, made a decent comeback in the contest with Mahmudullah Riyad and Miraz sharing a record-breaking 145-run stand for the fifth wicket.

Mahmudullah, who struggled with fitness throughout the innings, struck a run-a-ball 98 while Mehedi, playing his 100th ODI, scored 66 off 119 balls – the fifth slowest ODI fifty for Bangladesh (106 balls).

Mahmudullah got close to what would have been his fifth ton and a first in a non-ICC event, but could only score two runs in the last over, eventually falling two runs short of the magic figure and getting run out off the final delivery of the innings.

Bangladesh will now fly to West Indies for a full-fledged bilateral series which will start with a two-match Test series, scheduled to start in Antigua on November 22.