

PUNCHLINES AND PROGRESS

The rise of stand-up comedy

From the witty exchanges of Bengali folk songs and the satirical undertones of theatrical productions to the cheeky punchlines of television dramas, laughter has been an essential part of our culture and a popular outlet for connection and commentary. However, the concept of stand-up comedy, an individual armed with a microphone and delivering witty and observational humour to a live audience, has been a foreign notion until relatively recently.

Over the years, the scene, especially in urban areas like Dhaka, has transformed into the new go-to for entertainment from an obscure idea. So, it is natural for one to wonder how this transformation happened. What made people acknowledge stand-up comedy as a budding art form? The answers lie in the stories of its pioneers and the societal shifts that have shaped its growing popularity.

Ferdous Utsho, an employee at a digital marketing agency, regularly attends shows with his friends to unwind after a hectic workweek.

"On Thursday nights, we gather at a comedy show to catch up and laugh



Sami Doha

together. It has become our way of escaping the daily grind and starting the weekend on a positive note," he shares.

The beginnings: A slow start

You tell people you're starting a comedy club. What would be their first reaction? Perhaps laughter...but not the good kind!

That's exactly what Naveed Mahbub, one of the pioneers in Bangladesh, faced when he launched Naveed's Comedy Club



Nilima Rafi

(NCC), where he now remains as its CEO. According to Mahbub, the story began during the early 2010s — a time when the concept was barely understood.

He elaborates, "When we started the Club back in 2010, the biggest challenge was finding performers. We didn't have many comedians at the time, and to organise regular shows, we needed a consistent line-up."

In the beginning, shows were sporadic,

poorly attended, and often misunderstood by the majority. Sadly, artistes who emerged during this time leaned heavily toward slapstick or theatrical humour and borrowed inspiration from Western styles.

Remembering the initial struggles, Sami Doha, a telecom expert turned celebrated stand-up comedian, says, "You see, back then, performances were mainly Dhaka-centric, and shows were sporadic. The audience did not quite understand what stand-up comedy was, and performers were few and far between. Everyone considered it to be a hobby and not a profession."

The lack of platforms only contributed to the struggle, as early enthusiasts mostly performed in cafés or as opening acts for bigger events. Nevertheless, the hurdles were there, and so was the determination.

The turning point

According to Naveed Mahbub, the advent of social media platforms in the 2010s was a game-changer for the stand-up comedy scene, with Facebook and YouTube becoming vital tools for performers to share content, reach wider audiences, and establish a presence beyond live shows.

