

# Comparison is a curse

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## VICKY ZAHED



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RAKSHANDA RAHMAN MISHA

The human psyche has always been a source of endless fascination for Vicky Zahed. Known for weaving stories that blur the line between reality and imagination, he has built a reputation for leaving audiences stunned with twists they never see coming.

At present, the director has his hands full with two back-to-back projects—*Khowabnama*, released yesterday on the Capital Drama YouTube channel, while his Hoichoi original *AKA* will follow closely behind on September 4. Adding to the excitement, *Khowabnama* arrived just a day before his birthday, making the release all the more special.

In the midst of all this, we caught up with Vicky to talk about his latest projects, the ongoing buzz around his career, and what lies ahead. Just last Wednesday, several social media pages claimed that he would soon be making his silver screen debut alongside Afran Nisho. When asked about it, the director admitted he was just as surprised as anyone else.

"I don't know where these rumours stem from," Vicky clarified. "Honestly, I haven't said anything anywhere about doing a film, neither on my Facebook nor on any other social handle. Nothing has been finalised yet. Yes, I am planning to make movies, but when everything is set in stone, I will let people know. With my first film, I plan to explore the thriller genre."

While *Khowabnama* is a romantic tragedy, *AKA* is a psychological thriller—both hold a special place for the director. *Khowabnama* delves into the power of love and its potential to push a person to extremes. Starring Tawsif Mahbub and Tanjin Tisha, the project has already created a buzz with its posters. "I'm really nervous about this project, especially seeing the social media reactions. I truly love this story, and it feels like a gift to my fans for my birthday," Vicky shared.

One scene, in particular, has become a talking point online: Tawsif Mahbub being buried deep in the ground, surrounded by snakes. "We actually dug a grave with the help of real gravediggers and draped Tawsif in an actual shroud (*kafoner kapor* in Bengali). He couldn't



move at all, and on top of that, he was terrified of snakes. We placed six snakes on him, and the scene was shot around 3am or 4am. He had to completely rely on us for safety. It was a daring stunt, but he performed it bravely. Honestly, this scene isn't just a gimmick; it's essential to the plot. When viewers watch the series, they'll understand why it was crucial."

Although Vicky rarely directs romantic dramas, his previous works, including *Chirokāl Aaj* and *Neel Shukh*, infused romance with unexpected twists that kept audiences hooked. "I don't do many romantic dramas, but the ones I do are loved by the audience. *Neel Shukh* was primarily a love story, but the ending had a thrilling twist. People also enjoyed *Chirokāl Aaj*. Since the audience wanted me to explore romance, I decided to make a tragic romantic drama with *Khowabnama*."

With *AKA*, Vicky Zahed experimented with a social thriller for the first time. "*AKA* is meta, which means the audience can relate to many elements of the story. You'll feel like you're living in its world. It's the journey of a common man who becomes extraordinary. I'm fascinated by the human mind. *AKA*'s (the main character) psyche is very intriguing; he sees animal faces

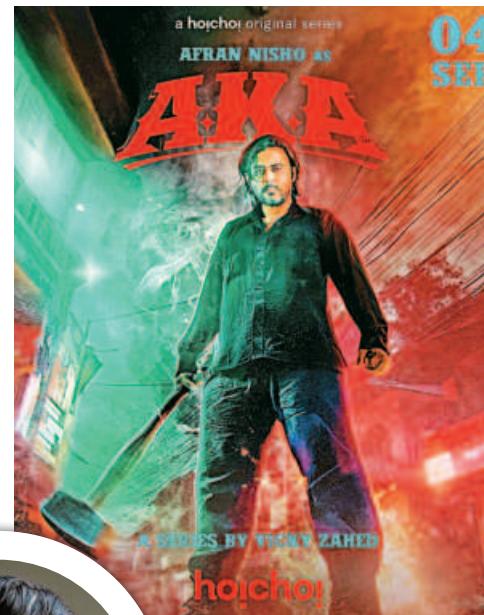
instead of human ones, is in love with music, and has phenomenal writing skills. If you watch the trailer, you'll hear some powerful dialogue. This character is complex: someone capable of writing beautiful words while also brutally harming others. Afran Nisho shares a romantic moment with Masuma Rahman Nabila in the series. It's fascinating to see how he balances everything, and I believe audiences will be hooked by his journey."

Lately, Vicky has frequently collaborated with Azizul Hakim, experimenting with different morally grey characters. "People have mostly seen him in positive roles. He's a true gentleman in real life, but I wanted to break that image. So, I cast him as a devil-worshipper in *Silence*, and people were shocked. In *AKA*, his character has a vicious attitude and an important role. I have a feeling audiences will remember this character."

With great work comes great expectation, and people constantly expect excellence from Vicky. "It is really becoming a burden," he admitted. "From the beginning of any of my projects, there's immense pressure on me. I feel like I have to do better than my previous work. It's almost like a curse—when you've done many great projects, people start comparing. I put my heart and soul into all my projects, and if people still compare negatively, it really hurts."

PHOTOS: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSVED & COLLECTED

04 SEP



COMING SOON

**Farooki hails Lalon tribute, urges broader cultural recognition**

Filmmaker and Cultural Adviser Mostofa Sarwar Farooki has welcomed the government's decision to elevate Lalon Shah's death anniversary to a "Category A" national day, calling it a step towards dismantling intellectual colonisation.

In a social media post yesterday, he argued that nations are first made taught to see their culture as inferior. He said Lalon's songs were sidelined as "folk," not high art, while rock was dismissed as "counterculture."

He urged the post-July 2024 state to officially embrace cultural practices that already resonate globally. Alongside Lalon, the cabinet discussed honouring SM Sultan, Humayun Ahmed, and rock icons.

**Mustafa Monwar's 90th birthday to be celebrated with puppetry**



Legendary artist Mustafa Monwar will be honoured on September 1 with a day-long programme at Bangladesh Mohila Samity to celebrate his 90th birthday.

Titled *Mustafa Monwar Jayanti*, the celebration is being jointly organised by Hatakhorii in Acting, Actors Studio, and BotTala.

Festivities will begin at 9am with a children's doodling workshop, followed by a puppet show at 10am by Inventors and Together We Can, paying tribute to Monwar's pioneering contribution to puppetry.

The play *Bonnotherium*, directed by Evan Riaz and adapted from Sukumar Ray's *Heshoram Husiyarer Diary*, will be staged at 11am.

Ikrimkri will present children's books in the courtyard, reflecting Monwar's belief that art and reading belong with play.

# NEWS

## Bangladeshis losing 5.5 years to toxic air

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Lalmirhat, the least polluted district, records seven times the WHO threshold.

Between 1998 and 2023, the country's PM2.5 pollution -- particles smaller than 2.5 micrometres -- surged by 66 percent, eroding 2.4 years of life expectancy. In 2023, annual average PM2.5 rose to 60.8 micrograms, 1.7 times the national standard and more than 12 times the WHO guideline.

"If PM2.5 concentrations in Bangladesh were reduced to meet WHO limits, an average resident could live 5.5 years longer," the report states.

Dhaka faces one of the gravest impacts, with residents potentially living nearly seven years longer under WHO standards. Meeting the weaker national standard would still add over four years.

In Chattogram, residents could gain 6.2 years under WHO limits and 3.3 years under the national threshold.

Together, Dhaka and Chattogram -- home to nearly half the country's population -- would see average life expectancy rise by over six years.

Other centres show similar risks.

In Gazipur, residents could gain 7.1 years with cleaner air, while Narayanganj residents could add 6.6 years. In Comilla, Tangail, Khulna, and Mymensingh, the gains would range between five and six years, and in Sylhet 3.5 years.

The AQI's 2023 data shows global PM2.5 concentrations were 1.5 percent higher than that of 2022. Its toll on life expectancy is four times that of alcohol use, and five times that of transport injuries or unsafe water and sanitation.

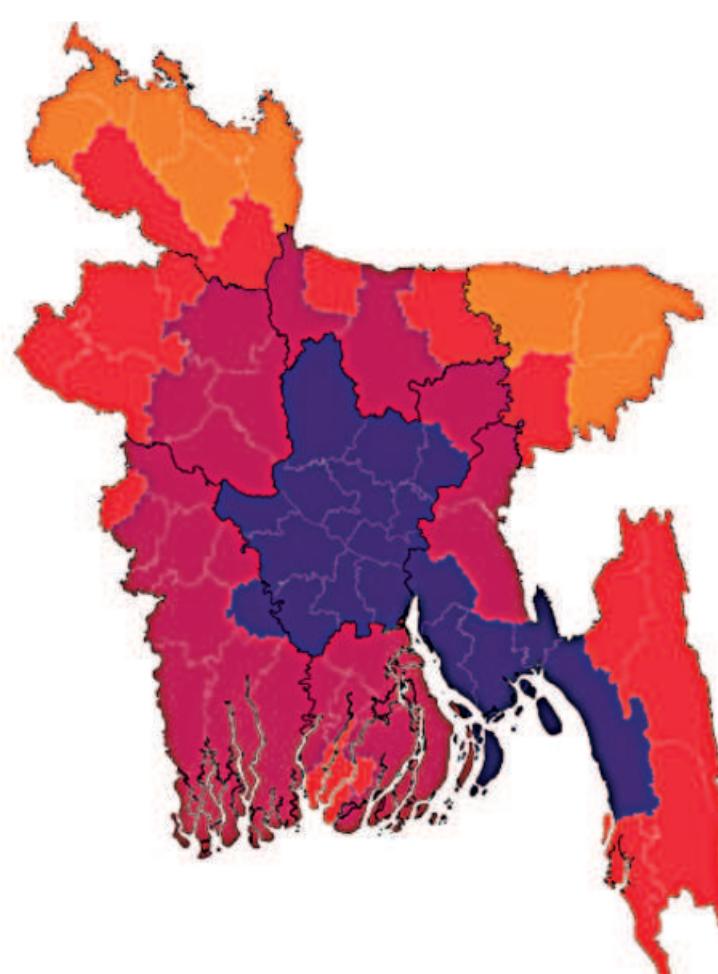
In 2022, Bangladesh's Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change formulated the Air Pollution Control Rules. These require a National Air Quality Control Plan, nationwide monitoring, identification of pollution-causing activities, and emission standards for industry, automobiles, and major projects.

In Dhaka, the 2019 brick kiln law bars kilns near residential, commercial, agricultural, and sensitive areas.

As a punitive step, the government

Potential life expectancy gain, in years, if PM2.5 level is permanently reduced to the WHO standard

3 to <4 4 to <5 5 to <6 >=6



last week declared Savar a "degraded airshed" and said operations of all brick kilns, except Tunnel Kilns and Hybrid Hoffman Kilns, will be restricted from next month.

Sources of PM2.5 include transboundary pollution, brick kilns, smoke from low-grade fuels, solid waste burning, and dust from construction. Brick kilns around Dhaka alone cause 58 percent of the city's air pollution. On February 24, the High Court ordered the removal of all illegal brick kilns nationwide.

"Even with full action, it will take years to reduce air pollution. We also need quality fuel, otherwise the air will remain polluted."

Speaking to The Daily Star, Environment Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan said 3,491 kilns without clearance would be shut down, and illegal kilns relocated. "We have already instructed closure of illegal kilns and are conducting drives at construction sites. The biggest challenge now is phasing out old vehicles."

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## Protests on amid campus shutdowns

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cannons, and truncheons.

**SHUTDOWN**

At Buet, which usually remains closed on Thursdays, students boycotted scheduled exams in solidarity. Departments and exam halls were empty yesterday morning. On Wednesday night, the university issued a notice, signed by Registrar Prof NM Golam Zakaria, postponing all undergraduate exams scheduled between August 30 and September 18. The notice cited "the prevailing situation".

Chittagong University of Engineering and Technology (Cuet) also saw a boycott of classes and exams, leaving its campus deserted.

At Rajshahi University, students from Engineering and Agriculture faculties blocked the Dhaka Rajshahi highway from 11:00am to 1:00pm. They marched on campus streets and staged a sit-in at the main gate.

Sifat Abu Saleh, chief organiser of the university chapter of the Engineering Rights Movement, told The Daily Star that many students were injured during the "Long March to Dhaka," several of them were critically wounded.

Faozul Kabir Khan, said the committee's role was to act as a bridge. "There are

"Despite repeatedly submitting memorandums to the government regarding their demands, we have received no response," he said.

**REVIEW BODIES**

The government formed two committees to examine the demands of engineering students and diploma engineers.

On Wednesday, an eight-member committee, led by Power, Energy, and Mineral Resources Adviser Muhammad Faozul Kabir Khan, was formed. After its first meeting yesterday, a 14-member working group was also constituted, led by Housing and Public Works Secretary Nazrul Islam.

Talking to reporters after the meeting at the Secretariat, Environment Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan, who is a part of the eight-member body, said the group would hear from both sides, consult experts, and review legal matters before submitting recommendations within a month. "This problem has existed for years and cannot be solved overnight," she said, urging protesters to submit demands in writing.

Faozul Kabir said the committee's role was to act as a bridge. "There are

differences between BSc and diploma engineers. Our task is to bring both sides together and work out a neutral solution."

The group will meet on Sunday.

Students under Prokoushod Odhikar Andolon are demanding that the post of assistant engineer in the ninth grade be filled only through exams, with BSc engineering as the minimum qualification. They also want higher degree holders to be eligible for 10th grade posts currently reserved for diploma engineers and insist that only BSc graduates should use the title "engineer".

Diploma engineers, meanwhile, are pushing for a seven-point demand. These include clearly separating their roles from those of BSc engineers, reserving sub assistant engineer posts for diploma graduates, and fixing the staffing ratio of BSc to diploma engineers at 1:5.

They also want the promotion quota from sub assistant to assistant engineer raised from 33 to 50 percent, administrative posts to remain under the admin cadre, and an end to cadre switching by engineers.

## Army chief

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ISPR said.

On August 22, the army chief was accorded a guard of honour at the PLA headquarters, followed by a meeting with General Chen Hui.

Their discussions focused on strategic cooperation between the two countries, enhancing people-to-people contact, support for the repatriation of forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals, and Chinese assistance in advancing Bangladesh's defence industry.

On August 23, General Waker met Chen Defang, President of NORINCO Group, and discussed matters related to the Bangladesh Army, including the upgradation and maintenance of military equipment currently in use.

He also visited the PLA Academy of Armoured Forces in Beijing, where Bangladeshi officers receive technical training, and inspected its training facilities and research laboratories for military equipment production, said ISPR.

The army chief also toured various factories and research centres of NORINCO Group in Beijing and Xiang, as well as China Aerospace Long-March International Co Ltd and Aisheng UAV Factory, where modern arms and ammunition are manufactured, the ISPR release added.

General Waker left for China on August 20 on an official visit.

each other, candidates are reaching out to voters, and even opponents are showing respect. The Shibir GS candidate gave me flowers, so did the JCD GS candidate," he said.

However, he criticised the government's decision to deploy the army on the polling day. Calling it "unjustified," Sadi said, "Dhaka University students are wise enough to decide what is good or bad. The army should safeguard national sovereignty, not patrol universities. Police are sufficient for security. If the administration does not reverse the decision, I will consider it has other political intentions."

Expressing concern, Sadi alleged, "A certain portion, like the fascist Awami forces, fears the students' mandate. Some in the administration know that the Duchs election will make them accountable. That is why an effort is being made to thwart this election."

He also said that his campaign has little to no budget. "Even in the last election, I spent nothing. I want to show that victory is possible without posters and banners."

Sadi said his panel reflects true diversity. "We have candidates from the hills, from flood-hit northern regions, from coastal areas. If such a diverse group wins, then people from all corners of Bangladesh will win."