



# The 'PUPPET MAN' who taught us to dream

An ode to Mustafa Monwar on his 90th



PHOTOS: STAR & COLLECTED

## RAKSHANDA RAHMAN MISHA

For '90s kids, BTV was more than just television; it was a window into their childhoods. One show that left a lasting mark was the beloved children's programme *Moner Kotha*.

I immediately fell in love with its vibrant characters: the bubbly Parul, the carefree Baul *bhai* who sang without a hint of worry, and the hilarious Shar *bhai*. Their personalities couldn't have been further apart, yet their friendship always shone through, amidst all the silliness. Each episode had its own little 'happily ever after.'

And then there was our favourite, Dadu *bhai* (Mustafa Monwar). He wasn't just a character. He was a teacher, a storyteller, and for many of us, the first person who taught us how to hold a pencil and see magic in the simplest lines. He would sketch a leaf, or a bird, and along with it share quiet lessons about life. Later, he appeared on screen as himself, fondly called 'Shilpi *bhai*' by Parul, Baul, and Shar. The man with the gentle smile and kind eyes wasn't simply drawing; he was opening windows into our imagination.

What I didn't know as a child was that this gentle figure was, in many ways, a rebel. Mustafa Monwar's art was never just about puppets or paintings. It was about freedom,

about expression, and about believing that children deserve more than entertainment; they deserve hope, creativity, and courage.

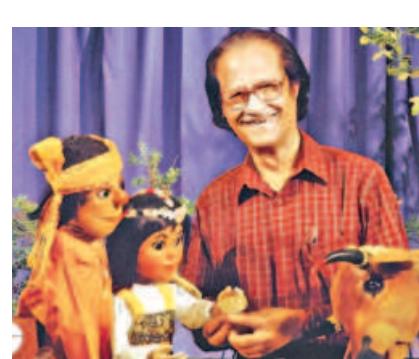
While searching for *Moner Kotha* episodes on BTV's YouTube channel, I came across an old video interview, where he talked about its importance in his life.

He described how, even during challenging times, he pursued puppetry passionately, always learning and experimenting. When he joined BTV, he realised he wanted to create something truly meaningful for children.

"While coming up with names, I found a really beautiful one called Parul. I loved that she wakes up her seven brothers every day. Parul has the power to inspire change in society. Then there is Baul, a symbol of our culture, who sings from the heart and never offends anyone. He travels across the country with his songs, and all he wants is the well-being of the people. Shar *bhai*, the buffalo, listens to Baul's songs, loves painting, and tries to draw as well. Sometimes Shar *bhai* and Baul *bhai* get into playful fights. Despite all that, they still love each other deeply. Puppetry is a form of art. It teaches humanity, encourages us to embrace the beauty of nature within ourselves, and express that beauty through creativity," stated the renowned artiste.

Monwar's belief in the power of puppetry

**Monwar's belief in the power of puppetry was tested during Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971. He visited a large refugee camp where the silence of children struck him deeply. They had food and shelter, but their faces had no trace of joy.**



was tested during Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971. He visited a large refugee camp where the silence of children struck him deeply. They had food and shelter, but their faces had no trace of joy.

With just three or four students, Monwar created puppets—a farmer, a freedom fighter, and Yahya Khan. In one unforgettable scene, Yahya Khan points a gun at the farmer and asks, "Where is Mukti (Freedom fighter)?". The farmer replies, "Don't shoot me. I'll tell you," then looks around and finally points to himself and says, "Mukti lives within me. All Bengalis carry the spirit of freedom fighter within them." For the first time in weeks, Monwar finally saw the children smile again.

From refugee camps to the BTV studio, his puppets never stopped speaking for us; they told stories of resilience, beauty, and freedom. And he gave us other treasures too, like *Notun Kuri*, which will soon be on air after two decades.

Just recently, children gathered at the Bangladesh Mahila Samity to celebrate *Mustafa Monwar Jayanti*. They made more than 30 greeting cards for him, colourful testaments of love. Puppet shows filled the stage, while Botala staged *Bonmetherium* for the audience.

At his home, Channel i honoured him as well, with actor Afzal Hossain and painter

Monirul Islam paying tribute. True to form, Monwar asked for more than 100 birds to be released into the sky—a gesture so perfectly him, a symbol of the freedom and imagination he has lived for.

It would be unfair to think of him only as the man behind puppets. Monwar's artistry was vast. He wrote and produced plays like *Roktokorobi* and *Mukhora Romoni Boshikoron*, both recognised internationally.

His recognition began early: a Gold Medal for Best Graphic Work at the All-India Fine Arts Exhibition in 1957, and two more for oil and watercolour at Kolkata University. Later came the Ekushey Padak in 2004, and countless other honours along the way.

But if you ask me, his greatest achievement is something more delicate, something less tangible. It's the way generations of children grew up believing that creativity matters, that art can make you free, and that even in the darkest of times, joy can be found through imagination.

And maybe that is why, decades later, I can still close my eyes and hear Baul *bhai*'s carefree songs, Parul's laughter, and Shar *bhai*'s hungry jokes. And in the middle of it all, Dadu *bhai*'s patient voice, sketching not just on paper, but across the canvas of our childhood.

## NEWS

### BNP at 47: Caught between prospects

FROM PAGE 12

lack of unity at the grassroots remain pressing challenges.

Prof Mojibur Rahman of Dhaka University's Institute of Education and Research observed that while the BNP initially seized the post-August 5 opening, its activists soon got mired in crimes.

"At first, we saw the party was doing well, but later we saw the party men getting involved in extortion, grabbing, tender manipulation, and various criminal activities," he said.

Prof Al Masud Hasanuzzaman of Jahangirnagar University's government and politics department noted that the BNP must rein in its grassroots to stay on the right track.

BNP's long spell out of power is unprecedented. Founded in 1978, it had earlier ruled under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman and Khaleda Zia for over a decade in total. Leadership now rests with their son, Tarique Rahman, who has been in London since 2008.

The party weathered the 2007-08 army-backed caretaker regime; a debacle in the 2008 polls; boycotts in 2014 and 2024; and widespread rigging in 2018. With Hasina's ouster, opportunities have emerged, but so have internal challenges.

BNP itself admits to disciplining over 5,000 members for wrongdoings.

Rights group Ain o Salish Kendra reports 77 BNP men were killed in infighting over the last 11 months.

Aminul Haque, convener of Dhaka North City BNP, said, "After August 5, some so-called new BNP

activists have been engaged in unethical activities. In this context, the party's biggest challenge now is to weed them out and prepare for the February election."

Secretary General Fakhrul, speaking at a discussion at the Jatiya Press Club on Friday, urged BNP leaders and activists to refrain from doing anything that tarnishes the party's image. "You haven't yet come near power. Many conspiracies are afoot. You must tackle those and go to the people with your unity and good deeds."

#### NOMINATION, POLARISATION

The upcoming polls will also test the BNP's nomination process, with insiders fearing an outburst of resentment among long-suffering leaders if they are denied tickets.

Analysts warn the party must avoid "selling" nominations and ensure competent candidates are fielded.

Prof Hasanuzzaman said, "The BNP's nomination process must not turn into a business like in the past, and the right person is expected in the right place. For this, preparation is needed."

Another challenge comes from opportunists who joined the BNP after AL's collapse. "Three types of people are in the BNP now: the original BNP, former AL men seeking shelter, and secret groups," said Prof Mojibur. "The party must be careful."

While Jamaat has already announced its candidates, the BNP has not, and the uncertainty risks deepening divisions. Prof Mojibur said that since the BNP has yet to

decide its candidates, many problems are likely to continue emerging.

A survey by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development shows undecided voters rising to 48.5 percent from 38 percent over eight months, signalling BNP's difficulty in energising the electorate, for the first time under Tarique's leadership and despite AL's absence.

Uncertainty is also growing over whether the election will be held on time, as Jamaat and NCP press for the July Charter's implementation and proportional representation, which the BNP opposes.

#### GOVERNANCE, ECONOMY

Even if BNP returns to power, analysts warn that restoring law and order, reforming institutions long dominated by officials appointed under AL's influence, and rebuilding business confidence will be major tests.

Prof Hasanuzzaman said, "If the party comes to power, even bigger challenges [than controlling the grassroots] in socio-economic, political, and international arenas will arise, which it will have to face."

Industrial zones have already seen at least 15 clashes among BNP factions over the jhooth (fabric scraps) business, leaving 30 injured and unnerving traders. Business leaders stress that only political stability will reassure them.

Prof Mojibur said that Tarique's biggest test, if the party returns to power, will be whose advice he follows. Ignoring the party's seasoned, trusted leaders would be his gravest mistake, he added.

Speaking at a programme titled "National Consultation on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in the Electoral Process" at the Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre in the capital yesterday, he said, "On behalf of the commission, we'll do

everything realistically possible. We're considering whether we can deploy assistants—volunteers from BNCC and Scouts. Alongside this, a logical suggestion has been raised regarding transport facilities, and we must take that into consideration."

He added that persons with disabilities should be able to cast their votes anywhere inside the polling centre, including the ground floor, if they wish.

### Evil forces attempting to foil polls

FROM PAGE 12

opportunity for people to establish their rights in Bangladesh through elections," he said while addressing a discussion.

The discussion, titled "Purpose and Significance of the BNP's Establishment", was held at the Institute of Engineers, Bangladesh (IEB), in Dhaka, marking the party's 47th founding anniversary.

While the interim government is trying to uphold the people's rights, some political parties are imposing conditions to serve their partisan interests, Tarique said.

"By doing so, they may be attempting to create obstacles in the electoral path in a planned way."

He said the BNP from the very beginning has been pressing the demand for holding an election at the quickest possible time, as the party believes that people need political power first. "If an elected government formed through direct voting fails to fulfill public expectations, people will get a chance to change

that government through the next election, something that is practiced in democracies worldwide," he added.

Tarique urged the democratic political parties to refrain from blocking the electoral process with conditions saying that no reform initiatives would be sustainable by creating obstacles to the practice and application of the people's rights.

"Establishing people's rights through effective democratic political practice is much more urgent than textbook reforms," he said.

He said BNP fully agrees on the matter of reforms in the state and politics. Since reforms are important. But he cautioned that no reform will be sustainable if obstacles are created in the exercise of people's rights.

Though the interim government came based on public desires, Tarique said he does not think that there is any logical reason to expect this government to perform like an efficient and accountable political

government.

The longer the interim government stays in power, the more its weaknesses will become visible, giving anti-uprising evil forces scope to create confusion, he warned.

Pointing to recent incidents, including the attack on Gono Odhikar Parishad President Nurul Haque Nur, Tarique said the country's stability is either becoming complicated or being made complicated.

Criticising mob violence, he said, "No one of us will tolerate mob violence. Every soldier of Shaheed Zia and Khaleda Zia will be sensitive and respectful towards the dignity and rights of women."

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, its Standing Committee members Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, Gayeshwar Chandra Roy, Abdul Moyeen Khan and Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury, among others, spoke at the discussion conducted by BNP Publicity Affairs Secretary Sultan Salauddin Ahmed Tuku.

### Govt must be held accountable

FROM PAGE 12

at Dhaka Medical College Hospital in the afternoon.

"There is an attempt to bring Awami League back through Jatiya Party. Fascist forces are now showing their strength in different forms. They are targeting those who led the July uprising and trying to take revenge."

The adviser said an investigation committee has already been formed to identify and punish those involved.

"We also came to know that prior to this incident, Gono Odhikar Parishad and Nurul Haque Nur had received threats. The government should look into who issued these threats, and from which institutions within the state structure such fascist activities will continue."

He also alleged that Jatiya Party is an "identified fascist force" that repeatedly legitimised the AL's authoritarian parliament in the past.

"If anyone tries to support such fascists again, it must be resisted collectively."

#### NUR'S HEALTH IMPROVING

Meanwhile, DMCH Director Brig Gen Asaduzzaman told reporters that Nur is now doing well and is likely to be released from the hospital soon.

"However, he is still experiencing pain and problems sleeping due to the blunt force trauma and fractures he sustained. We conducted another CT scan and found that intracranial

hemorrhage has healed significantly."

The hospital authorities will decide soon on shifting him to a cabin from the ICU, he added.

"Such fractures usually heal within four to six weeks, and he [Nur] does not need to remain in the hospital. He is expected to be discharged within a week, as the fractures are not displaced and will heal over time," the hospital director said, adding that Nur is now able to speak to others and is consuming liquid food.

The Gono Odhikar Parishad president was admitted to intensive care following a head injury, along with fractures in his jaw and nose. He also suffered an internal bleed in the brain.

Nur was beaten up by police and other members of other law enforcement agencies during a clash between supporters of Gono Odhikar Parishad and Jatiya Party in the capital's Kakrail on Friday.

### Country now has 12.63cr voters

FROM PAGE 12

on October 31, and based on that we will finalise the voter roll," he said.

Asked whether there will be special arrangements for voters with disabilities, he said the EC would try to accommodate them as much as possible.

Meanwhile, Election Commissioner Abul Fazal Md Sanauallah said the EC is considering deploying volunteers from the Bangladesh National Cadet

Corps and Bangladesh Scouts at polling centres to assist persons with disabilities, the elderly, and those unable to physically move easily in casting their votes.

Speaking at a programme titled "National Consultation on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in the Electoral Process" at the Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre in the capital yesterday, he said, "On behalf of the commission, we'll do