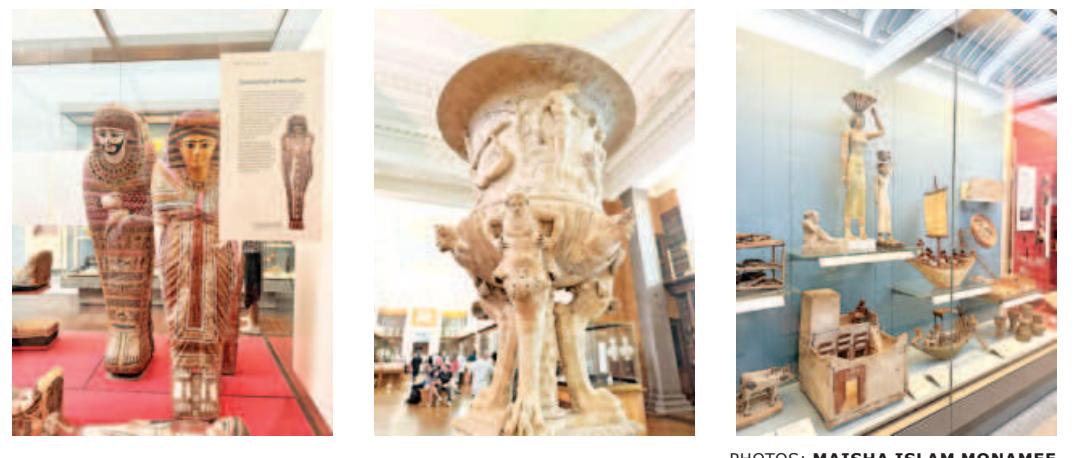
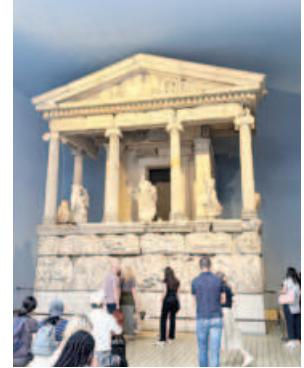


# Gods, graves, and gallery lighting: A love letter to looted civilisations

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

**The British Museum is a thief's scrapbook, but it is also a mirror held up to our shared history, flaws and all. I left thinking not just about what I saw, but about what I did not: restitution, accountability, and perhaps someday, return.**



PHOTOS: MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

They say you cannot see the world in a day, but they clearly haven't been to the British Museum. After five hours of exploration, I came out questioning three things: time, empire, and how exactly one steals a whole monument without anyone noticing. Spending the entire day willingly trapped in this paradox of beauty and theft, walking through civilisations neatly tagged and sealed behind glass. It is hard to describe the feeling of seeing cultures you grew up reading about suddenly standing before you intact, labelled, and suspiciously far from home.

I started with Egypt. I was greeted by a towering statue of Ramesses II, that loomed like a stone sentinel, his chipped mouth still smug, as if daring me to question why his torso was in London and his legs, presumably, still sulking somewhere in Egypt. The galleries sprawled from there; rooms full of painted coffins so intricate they looked like divine contracts, their surfaces covered in hieroglyphs—prayers, invocations, instructions for the soul's journey.

And then the mummies, wrapped in linen, impossibly old, heartbreakingly human. You expect something ghostly, but what hits you is how real it is.

Brown, leathery skin stretched tight over cheekbones, eyelids still shut, and fingernails visible.

The next ones were Greece and Rome. If Egypt was enchanting, the Greek and Roman exhibits were pure drama. The Parthenon Marbles (or as Greece likes to call them, "Our National Trauma") sat imposingly under diffused skylight, displayed as if they were British born. Gods in motion, horses in mid-gallop, muscle and divinity carved into cold marble. Just a few steps away was the Nereid Monument, an entire Lycian tomb from the 4th century BCE, now reconstructed like a divine LEGO set.

Rome, of course, offered grandeur with a touch of smugness. Augustus with his propaganda busts. Julius Caesar, forever stern. Roman generals who once led legions are now reduced to torso sculptures, missing arms but not ego. The utensils, board games, keys, and makeup were all proof that Romans really were the blueprint for modern life: organised, efficient, and narcissistic.

I ended my tour in the Reading Room. A dome of knowledge, designed to be silent and reverent. Books everywhere, mostly in English. The room felt like a monument to a version of history

curated, cropped, and colonised.

I exited the British Museum after nearly five hours, intellectually bloated and morally conflicted. I had spent a day time-travelling, witnessing humanity's finest artistry and worst greed. The contradiction is unbearable, but also unmissable. Because while I was angry about how these pieces got here, I was also grateful I got to see them. The British Museum is a thief's scrapbook, but it is also a mirror held up to our shared history, flaws and all. I left thinking not just about what I saw, but about what I did not: restitution, accountability, and perhaps someday, return.

## Kheyali marks 50 years with a two-day festival at Shilpkala

Dhaka's long-standing theatre group Kheyali Natya Goshthi will mark its 50th anniversary with a two-day festival at Bangladesh Shilpkala Academy's Studio Theatre Hall on October 24 and 25.

Founded on February 21, 1975, in memory of Sirajuddin Khan and on Language Martyrs' Day, Kheyali

has spent five decades blending theatre with social and cultural activism.

The festival opens with *Kangaler Joto Kotha*, featuring songs, poems, and plays by founder AKA Kabir. The second day presents the musical and dance drama *Manush Hobo*, exploring

humanity and compassion.

Guest troupes—Maitri Theatre, Rongpeeth Nattyadal, and Shoukhine Theatre—will perform *Bir Angona*, *Sadakalo*, and selected scenes from *Arek Falgun*.

"This celebration is a call for dignity and a humane society through art," said Shahin Ahmed.



## NEWS

### Takaichi makes history

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making her the latest leader in tune with the broader rightward shift in global politics. She received 237 votes in the election in parliament's 465-seat lower House yesterday and then won a similar vote in the less powerful upper House.

Her victory was secured after her Liberal Democratic Party, which has governed Japan for most of its postwar history, agreed on Monday to form a coalition with the right-wing Japan Innovation Party, known as Ishin.

Together the parties are two seats short of a majority in the lower house. That means Takaichi's success will

depend on her winning the cooperation of more opposition lawmakers, said Tadashi Mori, a professor of politics at Aichi Gakuin University.

"The two parties do not command a majority in either chamber and to ensure a stable government and gain control of key parliamentary committees, they will need to secure more than half the seats," he said.

Takaichi takes over when Japanese politics appears more fractured than at almost any other time in recent memory, thanks in part to the rise of the smaller, hard-right Sanseito Party, which has siphoned voters away from the LDP.

"While we won't hesitate to oppose her when necessary, we intend to maintain a friendly working relationship," he said.

The LDP's former coalition partner, the more moderate Komeito, broke up their 26-year-old alliance this month after the LDP chose the right-wing Takaichi as its new leader.

"Since former Prime Minister Abe passed away, we've felt that both national politics and the LDP itself have drifted leftward," Sanseito head Sohei Komiya told broadcaster NHK, adding he hoped Takaichi would steer national politics back to the middle.

Among the signatories were poet Nirmalendu Goon; lawyer ZI Khan Panna; TIB Executive Director Dr Iftekharuzzaman; educationist Abdul Bayes; Dhaka University professors Dr Zobaida Nasreen, Samina Luthfa

and Dr Kaberi Gayen; Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua; poet Gultekin Khan; writer Nasreen Jahan; actor Kochi Khondokar; lawyer and journalist Manzur Al Matin; writer and researcher Sushmita Preetha; and filmmaker Dipankar Dipon, among others.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, in a separate statement signed by its President Fauzia Moslem and General Secretary Maleka Banu, said, "We have observed that most media organisations have not yet formed or activated any effective

committees to address sexual harassment and abuse, as directed by the Honourable High Court.

"The Bangladesh Mahila Parishad is therefore calling for departmental action against those involved in the recent incident of sexual harassment and urging all media houses to form and effectively operate complaint committees against sexual harassment and abuse in accordance with the Honourable High Court's directives, to ensure the safety of women employees in the workplace."

### Roads deadly, committees silent

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formed the Cabinet Committee on Road Safety with the then road minister as the convener of the seven-minister body.

The committee was supposed to take steps to remove markets and commercial establishments along national and regional highways and keep illegal three-wheelers known as "Nasimon" and "Karimon" off the roads, reads the Cabinet Division circular from February 13, 2014.

A high-powered task force led by the then home minister formed in October 2019 to execute 111 recommendations made by a government-commissioned committee to reduce crashes and bring discipline on roads.

The task force held several meetings during the previous government. But it too became non-operational after the

political changeover. The Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) Act 2017 specifies the formation of an advisory council under the leadership of the road minister. The law stipulates seven terms of action for the advisory council, four of which are directly related to ensuring road safety and bringing discipline to the road transport sector.

The council held its first and, so far, the last meeting in May 2024.

Since 1997, the government has been preparing strategic action plans for improving road safety.

The National Road Safety Council approved the National Road Safety Strategic Action Plan (2021-2024) in November 2022 to reduce road crash fatalities and injuries by 20 to 25 percent by the end of 2024.

The tenure of the action plan

expired, but the authority neither assessed the plan's outcome nor took steps to update it, the BRTA official said, seeking anonymity.

Abu Momtaz Saad Uddin Ahmed, chairman of BRTA, denied allegations that the interim government has failed to take visible steps to improve road safety.

He said mobile court drives are being conducted to remove vehicles that have exceeded their economic lifespan and rejected allegations that the initiative had lost momentum due to pressure from transport associations.

"We are actively working, and you will see changes soon," he told this correspondent.

When asked about the inactive committees, he said efforts are underway to reconstitute them.

the medical allowance and festival allowance unchanged, for now.

At the entry level, a teacher in an MPO-listed institution receives a monthly salary of Tk 12,500, along with Tk 1,000 as house rent allowance and Tk 500 as medical allowance. Teachers had demanded that the medical allowance be raised to Tk 1,500, and the festival allowance from 50 to 75 percent of their basic salary.

The movement began on October 12, when MPO-listed teachers and employees started a sit-in in front of the Jatiya Press Club. As they attempted to march towards the Secretariat, police used batons and sound grenades to disperse them, leaving several injured. The protesters regrouped at the Central Shaheed Minar the next day

and continued their sit-in, suspending classes nationwide.

On October 17, the teachers launched a hunger strike unto death, saying it would continue until the government met their demands. On October 19, the Finance Division approved a 5 percent increase in house rent allowance (minimum Tk 2,000), which the teachers rejected as "disrespectful and inadequate." They then issued a two-day ultimatum on October 20, demanding a 20 percent rise.

On September 30, the finance ministry had approved a Tk 500 increase in house rent allowance, which the teachers also rejected, calling it "insufficient."

Currently, around 3.8 lakh teachers and 1.7 lakh staff members work at more than 26,000 MPO-listed institutions across the country.

### 243 citizens, Mahila Parishad seek probe

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that the editor-publisher and the HR head could not evade moral and administrative responsibility for their inaction.

They also urged that workplace harassment prevention policies be strictly enforced across all institutions to ensure women's safety and dignity.

Among the signatories were poet Nirmalendu Goon; lawyer ZI Khan Panna; TIB Executive Director Dr Iftekharuzzaman; educationist Abdul Bayes; Dhaka University professors Dr Zobaida Nasreen, Samina Luthfa

and Dr Kaberi Gayen; Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua; poet Gultekin Khan; writer Nasreen Jahan; actor Kochi Khondokar; lawyer and journalist Manzur Al Matin; writer and researcher Sushmita Preetha; and filmmaker Dipankar Dipon, among others.

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### IMF's sixth tranche

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scraped by the political government.

"We have ensured them whichever government comes next will continue the reform programme."

The delayed authorisation of the sixth instalment will not pose any negative impact on the economy as the balance of payments and reserves are in a strong position, he said, adding that both the IMF and the World Bank praised Bangladesh's reform initiatives during the meetings in Washington.

So far, Bangladesh has received \$3.6 billion of the \$5.5 billion loan programme.

### Defence denies

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deaths was relatively low.

The tribunal said, "About 1,500 people were killed and 25,000 to 35,000 seriously injured. Is it a small number?"

Amir replied, "These were individual actions."

In response, tribunal Chairman Justice Golam Mortaza Muzumder said, "Many have said shots were fired from helicopters. The bullet trajectories were downwards."

The chairman referred to Hasina's alleged phone conversation— "Use the helicopter this time, fire from above".

Tribunal member Justice Md Shofiq Alam Mahmood added, "The prosecution said that in the audio recording, Hasina is heard ordering the use of lethal weapons and gunfire from helicopters."

Amir then said, "Such a claim can only be proven if the bullets retrieved from the bodies match the weapons used on the helicopters."



### Bapparaj, Dighi pair up for the first time in 'Biday'

Director Mehedi Hassan Hridoy, who gained fame with *Borbaad* starring Shakib Khan, has begun shooting his new film *Biday* in Taherpur, Sunamganj. After months of speculation about his next project, producer Shahrin Akter confirmed that the *Borbaad* follow-up featuring Siam Ahmed has been postponed. *Biday* instead stars Bapparaj and Prarthana Fardin Dighi in their first on-screen collaboration. Shooting began last Friday, with Bapparaj—returning to cinema after a long break—joining on Monday to portray a chairman. He noted that cast members were asked not to reveal details until filming concludes later this month. *Biday* is slated for release next year.



### 'Darkaak' selected for Minsk International Film Festival Listapad

Bangladeshi filmmaker Zayed Siddiki's *Darkaak* (RAVEN, 2024) has been selected for competition at the 31st Minsk International Film Festival Listapad, running from October 31 to November 7.

It is Bangladesh's sole entry in the short film category and one of just 13 chosen from over 2,200 submissions. The festival's competition features 157 films from 41 countries.

Inspired by Shahidul Zahir's short story, Siddiki wrote the screenplay and dialogue. *Darkaak* follows an elderly man grappling with an existential crisis and his fading role within the family.

Screening is scheduled for November 2 at 3 pm at Minsk's Moskva Cinema.

### MPO-listed teachers, staff call-off strike

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Education Adviser Prof CR Abrar termed the government's move "a truly historic moment" for the education sector, saying it reflected the state's recognition of teachers' demands and contributions.

"Teachers deserve far greater respect, and it is the state's responsibility to help improve their living standards," he said in a press statement.

He added that the education ministry, along with the advisory council and Chief Adviser Muhammed Yunus, had worked tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure that teachers' voices were heard and understood.

While the government's decision met the first of the teachers' three major demands, it decided to keep

the medical allowance and festival allowance unchanged, for now.

At the entry level, a teacher in an MPO-listed institution receives a monthly salary of Tk 12,500, along with Tk 1,000 as house rent allowance and Tk 500 as medical allowance. Teachers had demanded that the medical allowance be raised to Tk 1,500, and the festival allowance from 50 to 75 percent of their basic salary.

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