



# When theatre speaks in letters

RBR

I found myself back on Bailey Road with my friends last weekend, after what felt like ages. Joining us was Anisul Haque, a friend's better half and the celebrated writer who makes pop culture look effortlessly stylish.

But the real significance lay not in our presence, but in the rare chance to witness theatre royalty -- Ramendu and Ferdousi Majumdar -- in action.

Love Letters, the 48th production of Group Theatre, was staged at the Nilima Ibrahim Auditorium of Bangladesh Mohila Samity. Directed by Tropa Majumdar and performed by her parents, it felt like the most heartfelt gift a child could ever give to their performer parents: a fully booked show.

Adapted from AR Gurney's Pulitzer-nominated drama and translated into Bengali by Abdus Selim, the play wove six decades of love and longing into the fabric of Bangladesh's Liberation War.

Exactly at this point, I made the mistake of mixing up the Indian rendition of the same play, Tumhari Amrita. For some odd reason, the name Amrita and the motif of letters made me think of Amrita Pritam and Sahir Ludhianvi. In reality, Javed Siddiqui's Hindi/Urdu adaptation -- directed by Feroz Abbas Khan and performed by Shabana Azmi and Farooq Sheikh -- was inspired by painter Amrita Sher-Gil. That performance, too, has a



PHOTO: STAR

cult following.

In Dhaka, however, Love Letters became an intimate Bengali adaptation. Minimalist in form yet rich in emotion, it was both a tribute to enduring love and to the Majumdar family's extraordinary legacy.

By sheer luck, I've seen both versions. Each reflects its own cultural fabric: Love Letters, rooted in Bangladesh's liberation narrative; Tumhari Amrita, in India's evolving social landscape. Both remind us that theatre's magic

lies not in elaborate sets but in the raw intimacy of human voices carrying stories of love, separation, and history.

With only two actors, letters, and emotions, Love Letters unfolded as a timeless experience. Ramendu as Ananta and Ferdousi as Maisha embodied two lifelong correspondents whose dreams, disappointments, and ambitions spanned sixty years.

Rather than dialogue, the story emerged through notes and cards, creating an atmosphere of intimacy,

love and separation, victories and defeats, memory and history. It was both a romantic drama and a reflection of Bangladesh's socio-cultural journey. It was the Theatre's commitment to blending global classics with local narratives.

The evening reminded me why Bailey Road remains the beating heart of Dhaka's theatre scene. I can still picture the old Mohila Samity theatre from my childhood, waiting for Dewan Gazi's Kicha to begin. The hall was dimly lit, wooden chairs creaked under eager audiences, and the thrill of anticipation hung in the air. For a child, the stage felt enormous. When the play began, the actors' voices filled the room with raw intensity, larger than life. That first encounter was more than just watching a performance, more like an initiation into the magic of theatre.

Mohila Samity, with its humble charm and buzzing atmosphere, became a symbol of Dhaka's cultural awakening. Legends like Ramendu and Ferdousi Majumdar built their reputations here, and countless young theatre lovers discovered the power of live performance.

Even today, memories of that old hall glow with nostalgia -- a reminder of a time when theatre was less about spectacle and more about soul. Dhaka people who missed this show, keep an eye out for the next. It is simple, yet it holds you in a lingering trance of unrequited love and longing.

## 'Frustrated' group trying to create instability: Fakhru

UNB, Naogaon

Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives Minister Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir yesterday said a "frustrated" group is trying to create instability in society.

"There is a frustrated group in the country. They remain disappointed all the time and, at different times, try to create instability in society," he said at a discussion marking the 165th birth anniversary of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore at Rabindra Kachari Bari in Naogaon.

Fakhru, also BNP secretary general, did not name any specific group.

Turning to politics, he lamented that the



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## UK LOCAL POLLS Labour Party suffers heavy losses Anti-immigrant Reform UK makes gains

REUTERS, London

Prime Minister Keir Starmer yesterday vowed to fight on to deliver on his promise to bring "change" to Britain after his Labour Party suffered heavy losses in local elections that deepened doubts over his ability to govern.

Just under two years after winning a landslide national election, Starmer saw voters punish his Labour government, dealing it a blow in some of its traditional strongholds in former industrial regions in central and northern England.

The main beneficiary was the populist, anti-immigrant Reform UK party led by Brexit campaigner Nigel Farage, which gained more than 350 council seats in England. It could also emerge as the main opposition in Scotland and Wales to the pro-independence Scottish National Party and Plaid

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## Frustration grows over contractual appointment

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bureaucrats. The two were on the list of 17 officials against whom a probe committee recommended punitive action for their involvement in scuffles at the public administration ministry on September 10, 2024, over appointments of DCs.

One of the two was appointed as the deputy commissioner of a district and the other was given a key post at the PMO.

Several pro-BNP officials told this newspaper that they are frustrated by the appointments. They fear that if those involved in scuffles at the Secretariat are given key posts, junior officers may feel encouraged to use force to secure promotions or desired postings.

Former secretary Badiur Rahman said officials capable of engaging in tussles at the Secretariat are unfit for public service.

"It's not possible for the prime minister to know every officer personally. The problem lies with those who recommended the appointment of these questionable officials," said Badiur, a former chairman of the National Board of Revenue (NBR).

Meanwhile, the sudden withdrawal of the secretaries of three vital divisions under finance and planning ministries exposed a lack of cohesion within the administration.

On March 25, Shahriar Kader Siddiky, secretary at Economic Relations Division (ERD); Nazma Mobarek, secretary at Financial

Institutions Division (FID); and Shirajun Noor Chowdhury, secretary at Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) were removed from their posts.

According to several finance ministry officials, Finance and Planning Minister Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury was unaware of such a decision. Soon after the minister learnt about it, he gave directives to reinstate all three.

Seeking anonymity, one of the ministry officials said that making such a decision without the knowledge of the finance minister reflects internal weakness in the administration.

Regarding this, Firoz Mia said, "Withdrawing and then reinstating officers in a top position like secretary creates a negative impact on others. This casts a shadow over the image of not only the administration, but also the government."

**WITHDRAWAL OF 6 SECRETARIES** Between February and March, the public administration ministry withdrew six serving secretaries from various ministries and divisions and attached them to it without mentioning any specific reason.

Seeking anonymity, one of them told The Daily Star, "I was labelled as a pro-BNP official and denied promotions during the tenure of the Awami League government. But at least I was able to work. Now, I'm not allowed to function even after being promoted to secretary. I cannot describe how humiliating this is."

## BNP moves to restore grassroots discipline

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81 units of Chhatra Dal, Jubo Dal, and Swechchhasabak Dal are expected to attend and brief him on the current organisational situation, said Rizvi, also senior joint secretary general of BNP.

The leadership will inform Tarique that wrongdoing by some grassroots leaders is largely due to weak organisational control, as many local committees have expired or become inactive, creating room for controversial activities, said party insiders.

The terms of 10 out of 11 committees of the BNP's affiliated and associate bodies have expired, they added.

The meeting is being held at a time when the BNP high command is concerned about the conduct of grassroots leaders and activists, as they are defying party instructions, engaging in criminal activities, obstructing law enforcers from discharging duties, and extorting money, said party insiders.

Some local leaders are even creating opportunities for people linked to the Awami League to get involved in BNP politics, they said.

"Recently, it has come to the notice that some groups, holding posts in Jubo Dal, have been showing muscle power, rehabilitating associates of the fascist, extorting money, engaging in illegal occupation of property,

and obstructing law enforcers from performing their duties ...." said a press release issued on May 5.

A standing committee member, who is also a minister, said on condition of anonymity that after the formation of the government, many senior party leaders have become less involved in organisational activities, creating space for controversial incidents at the grassroots.

"In some cases, party men even attacked police personnel. This is unacceptable. If such activities are not stopped immediately, they will cause greater damage to the party," he said.

Several recent incidents have embarrassed the party leadership.

For instance, in Feni, a man reportedly linked to the AL and accused in a case filed over the attack on the motorcade of late BNP chairperson and former prime minister Khaleda Zia, was made general secretary of a ward unit BNP committee.

After the central leadership became aware of the matter, the BNP expelled him from the party. The district committee concerned was also suspended. President and general secretary of the municipal unit BNP were expelled for their role in forming the controversial committee.

In Faridpur's Bhangra, the district BNP convener sought withdrawal of a murder case, calling it "political", although the key accused is the vice-

The official termed their withdrawal and attachment to the ministry "motivated and whimsical" and blamed a state minister and a senior secretary appointed on a contractual basis for such a decision.

### THE WAY FORWARD

To gather perspectives on restoring administrative discipline, this correspondent spoke with two secretaries and six additional and joint secretaries. Most of them said that cancelling contractual appointments to top posts would address half the problem, while assigning qualified officers to appropriate positions would resolve the rest.

A secretary currently on Post-Retirement Leave (PRL) said, "The prime minister has received praise for his speeches and actions. However, it is nearly impossible to maintain professionalism with the individuals picked for vital positions in the administration."

"Effective communication among secretaries must be ensured to make the administration dynamic. This is not possible with officers from a bygone era, as the administration has already entered an advanced stage. If the government fails to realise this, the situation will worsen day by day," observed the official.

When contacted, Ehsanul Hoque, senior secretary at the public administration ministry, declined to comment on the overall situation of the administration.

"I have nothing to say about it," he told The Daily Star.

president of Bhangra municipality AL.

Party insiders said the incident raised questions about whether some local leaders were trying to take initiatives to drop cases by terming them politically motivated in order to protect people going against the party rules.

In another incident, police detained the president of Cumilla Sadar upazila BNP over allegations of extortion. His supporters then gathered outside the station and chanted slogans demanding his release. He was freed around 12 hours later, party sources said.

In Narayanganj, supporters of a Jubo Dal leader attacked police personnel and snatched away the leader, leaving several officers injured. After the incident, the Jubo Dal leader was expelled.

In Rajshahi, the city unit of Jubo Dal expelled two ward-level leaders over their alleged involvement in snatching a tender submission box from the Rajshahi Development Authority office. The tender box was under police protection when a group of unruly men forcibly took it away.

In another incident in Narayanganj, a ward BNP general secretary was expelled after allegations of taking money from a businessman.

In Joypurhat, a BNP leader from Punat union in Kalai upazila was fired after he was sent to jail in a cattle theft case.

## Suvendu named West Bengal CM

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West Bengal governor RN Ravi dissolved the state assembly on Thursday, paving the way for the formation of the new government, reports Hindustan Times online.

Trinamool Congress said yesterday it will challenge the decision by the governor to dissolve the state assembly. Mamata also said in a press conference that she would not follow the convention of going to the governor to hand over her resignation as the state's chief minister.

## Gulf clash clouds truce deal hopes

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forces had targeted an Iranian oil tanker and another ship, and carried out air attacks on civilian areas on Qeshm Island in the Strait of Hormuz and nearby coastal areas. It said Iranian forces responded by attacking US military vessels east of the strait and south of the port of Chabahar.

A spokesperson for Khatam al-Anbiya Central Headquarters said the Iranian strikes inflicted "significant damage," but US Central Command said none of its assets was hit.

Later Iran's Press TV reported that, after several hours of exchanges, "the situation on Iranian islands and coastal cities ... is back to normal now".

The confrontation was not confined to the waterway. The United Arab Emirates said its air defences engaged with two ballistic missiles and three drones from Iran yesterday, resulting in three moderate injuries. Iranian forces seized the oil tanker

Suvendu Adhikari, who joined the BJP in December 2020 after leaving the Trinamool Congress, where he had once been a close associate of Banerjee, emerged as the clear choice. He defeated Banerjee in Nandigram in 2021 and more recently won the Bhabanipur seat, her traditional stronghold, by a margin of over 15,000 votes.

The BJP is understood to be considering the appointment of two deputy chief ministers. No one has held the post of a deputy chief minister

in Bengal in the last two decades, the last being CPM leader Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, who served under former chief minister Jyoti Basu.

The key contenders for the deputy chief ministers' posts -- one of which is likely to go to a woman leader -- are Agnimitra Paul, who won from Asansol Dakshin and Shankar Ghosh, the winning candidate from Siliguri.

Home Minister Amit Shah yesterday held separate meetings with Paul and Ghosh in Kolkata to discuss these arrangements.

Ocean Koi in the Gulf of Oman, east of the strait, over an alleged attempt to disrupt Iran's oil exports, state media said yesterday, quoting an army statement.

It said the Barbados-flagged tanker was carrying Iranian oil and "was trying to harm and disrupt oil exports...by exploiting regional conditions", without giving further explanation.

The oil tanker - which has been under US sanctions since February - was escorted to the southern coast of Iran and handed over to the judicial authorities, according to state media. Iran has created an authority to approve transit through the Hormuz and to collect tolls from vessels, a shipping journal said.

Around 1,500 ships and their crews are trapped in the Gulf due to the Iranian blockade in the Strait of Hormuz, the UN's International Maritime Organization (IMO) chief said in Panama on Thursday.

Meanwhile, an Israeli strike yesterday killed four people including two women in the southern Lebanon town of Toura, the health ministry said, as state media and AFP correspondents reported Israel was conducting widespread strikes.

Despite a truce in the war between Israel and Hezbollah, fighting has not stopped in south Lebanon, where an Israeli strike killed a civil defence rescuer earlier in the day.

The United States Central Command (CENTCOM) said that more than 70 tankers were being prevented from entering or leaving Iranian ports yesterday.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said that the US should get a response from Iran to its proposal to end the war.

"We'll see what the response entails. The hope is it's something that can put us into a serious process of negotiation," Rubio, told reporters in Rome yesterday.

## Bangladeshi broadcasters risk FIFA WC blackout

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"Given the government's current financial situation, this is a significant factor. It would have been good for the viewers if it were on the government channel, but considering our financial situation, we are not thinking about this right now. However, if anyone shows interest privately, the government may show interest based on mutual benefits."

Springbok's package deal, acquired from FIFA, includes television, radio, mobile, and internet rights.

According to documents seen by The Daily Star, the company is demanding USD 12.30 million (around Tk 150.98 crore), excluding applicable taxes, advance income tax and VAT, from BTV. The documents state that 50 percent of the amount must be paid by May 10, with the remaining due by June 10. The package includes live coverage and highlights of all 104 matches, including the opening and closing ceremonies.

According to insiders, T Sports, Star News and an event management company had shown interest in broadcasting the tournament at a significantly lower price, but Springbok has so far refused to reduce its asking price. Which means the cost could climb to nearly Tk 200 crore after taxes and VAT for a tournament, which, as per the schedule, will see 52 matches finish before 4:00am Bangladesh time, while the remaining 52 will begin after 4:00am.

### WHAT HAPPENED WITH BTV?

Ahead of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, BTV spent Tk 98 crore to secure terrestrial broadcasting rights for all matches following a late government move. T Sports and GTV separately acquired satellite rights.

In contrast, during the 2018 FIFA World Cup, BTV received the live feed free of cost from rights holders and reportedly earned around Tk 1.5 crore in advertising revenue.

A top BTV official requesting anonymity said no final decision has yet been made regarding this year's tournament.

According to the official, Springbok contacted Bangladesh's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, which later forwarded the matter to BTV.

The channel then approached Springbok last month to learn about pricing. Later, they also contacted FIFA in hopes of obtaining a free feed, but have not received any response so far.

The official said that neither BTV nor the Bangladesh government participated in FIFA's tender process announced on September 9 last year, and if they did, they might have gotten it for a lower amount.

### PRIVATE BROADCASTERS STRUGGLING WITH PRICING

Officials from private satellite channels said they had been in active discussions with Springbok earlier, but talks stalled because of the rigidity on asking price. Broadcasters believe the current

pricing is unsustainable for Bangladesh's market size, especially if BTV does not share the burden. They stressed that they are seeking a collaborative approach rather than a sub-licensing arrangement.

According to them, FIFA likely based Bangladesh's valuation on the widely reported Tk 98 crore deal involving BTV in 2022, and as the number of matches increased to 104 this year, the price has nearly doubled.

### SIMILAR PROBLEMS IN INDIA AND CHINA

Bangladesh, however, is not alone in facing a broadcast blackout. Millions of football fans in India and China could also miss the tournament because of unresolved broadcast rights negotiations.

According to Reuters, a Reliance-Disney joint venture offered around USD 20 million for Indian broadcast rights, well below FIFA's asking price, while Sony also declined to submit an offer.

No official broadcaster has yet been announced for China either, despite the country accounting for nearly half of all global digital and social viewing hours during the 2022 World Cup.

The 2026 tournament begins on June 11, leaving little time for broadcasters to finalise agreements, establish infrastructure and sell advertising inventory.

[Baharam Khan and Anisur Rahman also contributed to this report.]