‘The scarcity of actors forced me back on stage’

Syed Jamil Ahmed on acting return after 42 years



PHOTO: SHAHREAR KABIR HEEMEL

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DOWEL BISWAS

There is a particular irony in watching Syed Jamil Ahmed return to the stage after more than four decades as an actor. One of Bangladesh’s most influential theatre directors, who has spent much of his career shaping actors from the other side of the performance, is suddenly subject to the same conditions he has long asked performers to navigate.

In ***Round Heads and Pointed Heads*** (***Golmatha Ar Chokhamatha***), the maestro of Bangladeshi theatre appears as a judge—a relatively brief role, but one that acquires additional weight because of the actor behind it.

“Theatre is very much an actor’s medium. It is an event where a fictive world is created, and in that fictive world, the actors interact directly or indirectly with the spectators in a three-dimensional space,” he told The Daily Star.

The acclaimed theatre practitioner has spent most of his career on the other side of that equation. But returning to the stage has reminded him of something he had known since his training days: unlike film, theatre leaves the actor exposed.

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For the most prominent teacher of theatre in Bangladesh, this is not simply a distinction between two artistic forms. It is also a responsibility that a director must understand before asking an actor to step into that vulnerability.

“I believe that if one has to be a stage director, one really has to understand the actor very well,” he says. “I knew this from my National School of Drama days, but this time has strengthened that belief in me and also made me see clearly the vulnerable condition in which our actors, mostly from the middle class, act in a neoliberal, globalised world.”

Ahmed’s own experience with acting began at the National School of Drama, where he trained from 1975 to 1978. During his first year, all students went through a rigorous acting course before choosing their specialisation in direction, stagecraft or acting.

He chose direction. “I felt more comfortable behind the scenes than in front of the spectators,” he recalls.

After returning to Dhaka in 1979, Ahmed performed in two plays with Dhaka Theatre. The experience, once again, led him towards directing.

“During this acting process again, I found out that I feel more comfortable directing than acting,” he says. “Acting is a craft that requires a lot of understanding of the mechanics of acting.”

Yet stepping onto the stage again after 42 years has given him a different understanding of that craft.

“If the actor is not guided properly to build his or her character, then the actor has to be the one who faces the spectators and the criticism,” Ahmed says. “If there is not proper guidance from the director, then the actor tries various tricks from his or her bag of experience.”



But there is another, more practical reason why Ahmed returned. The production needed actors who could commit to the rehearsal process.

“What moved me, or rather forced me, to return to the stage is the scarcity of actors in Dhaka city,” he says.

However, the thespian is careful not to blame the actors. “Everybody is busy, and understandably so. I have no complaint. But it is difficult to get actors who are willing to commit their time, and also because there is no professional theatre in Bangladesh.”

“After this situation arose where very few actors were available, I suggested to Mohsina, to assure her and to stand by her and stand by Spardha, that I am willing to come on stage,” he said. “I think that helped because my presence attracted others, and gradually they gathered a team around Mohsina which was committed wholeheartedly to work.”

His return also changes how one sees his performance in ***Round Heads and Pointed Heads***. He does not appear to be trying to dominate the production simply because of who he is. His presence carries the weight of his history, but the role itself remains part of the larger ensemble.

That seems appropriate for a director whose own comments return repeatedly to the actor’s place within theatre. The stage, after all, is the one place where the director ultimately has to let go.

Syed Jamil Ahmed chose direction because he once felt more comfortable backstage. Four decades later, it was the shortage of actors that brought him back to the stage.

This time, in the latest stagings of ***Golmatha Ar Chokhamatha***, he was not the person directing the performance. He was the one who had to live through it.



PHOTOS: COURTESY

NEWS

The river took her land

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they cultivated the land and harvested the crops.

Over time, she became someone others relied upon.

People came to her when they needed money. Some borrowed rice or lentils. Others asked for vegetables.

“I never sent anyone away empty-handed,” she said.

Khatib was not a wealthy landowner nor an influential village elite. But he was respected. Villagers often invited him to local arbitration meetings. When women’s issues arose, many also sought Sakhina’s opinion.

The couple now lives in a small house on government land beside a Water Development Board embankment in Soroktari village under Raniganj union in Kurigram’s Chilmari upazila.

The Brahmaputra has taken everything from them. Over the past four to five years of erosion, the couple lost their land, then their homestead, then their orchard. It took away everything -- one after another.

Their family has broken apart. Of their three children, two sons now work as day labourers in Dhaka; their daughter has gone to live with her in-laws.

Khatib now farms other people’s land as a sharecropper. Sakhina works that land alongside him.

Like the Mondol couple, many others in the village have lost their land and homestead to the river. Along with it, families have broken up, and familiar, once-close neighbours have scattered.

“Most of the people who knew me are no longer in the village,” Sakhina says. “After the river took our land, everyone scattered.”

Her words carry within them another, less visible cost of river erosion.

A 2013 study on river-erosion-affected women, published in the journal Review of European Studies, found that displacement leaves women facing social isolation. The bonds of mutual cooperation and dependence once built into their social and moral relationships weaken sharply after erosion. What people lose is not only land or homes, but this social capital too.

According to Rezwana Karim Snigdha, a professor of anthropology at Jahangirnagar University, discussions about river erosion often overlook women’s experiences because public attention tends to focus on male landowners.

“When we think of a farmer or a landowner, we usually imagine a man,” she says. “As a result, men become the visible victims of losing land and property.”

But, she argues, women’s losses extend far beyond physical assets.

“We rarely acknowledge that a home cannot exist without women,” she says. “In reality, natural disasters displace families, but our social norms and practices often end up displacing women.”

A 2024 study published in the journal Environment and Urbanization Asia found that 94 percent of people displaced by river erosion said they had lost long-standing social relationships and community bonds.

Another study, published in the Bangladesh Research Foundation Journal in 2013, found that 65 percent of displaced women believed their social status had changed after displacement, while 60 percent reported growing distance from relatives and familiar social circles.

For those who once knew the Mondol family, the memories remain vivid.

Sixty-year-old agricultural labourer Mobarak Ali, who now lives on the embankment himself, once worked on Khatib’s land.

“When we worked on Mondol’s farm, we always had enough to eat,” he said. “Mondol-er bou treated every labourer with respect.”

Raniganj Union Parishad Chairman Monjurul Islam said river erosion destroys far more than physical assets.

“It takes away people’s social standing, their sense of security and their hopes for the future,” he said.

According to the Asian Development Bank’s 2020 Jamuna-Meghna River Erosion Mitigation Project report, river erosion claims around 10,000 hectares of land in Bangladesh every year, affecting more than 100,000 people.

Yet the figures still fail to capture what people like Sakhina have truly lost.

No report records how many women have lost the names by which entire communities once knew them.

No database counts the friendships that vanished with a village.

No survey asks how many still wait to hear a familiar voice call them by a name that made them feel they belonged.

Sakhina Begum still pines for those days. If, by chance, she runs into someone from her old life in the fields, and they call out, as they used to, -- “Oi... Mondol-er bou...” -- her face still breaks into a warm smile.

Jamaat, NCP solo bids question

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Meanwhile, the current leadership has also begun discussions with several former senior leaders who resigned from the party after the electoral alliance with Jamaat.

They were being contacted with a view to restructuring the organisation and possibly bringing them back into the party, according to people involved with the proceedings.

However, the NCP leaders said the party must also consider its effectiveness in parliament, for which an alliance with Jamaat is needed.

“The NCP’s electoral alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami and their subsequent work together as the opposition in parliament were all formed around demands for reforms. Considering those demands, the alliance between the NCP and Jamaat remains in place,” Akhter Hossen, NCP member secretary, told The Daily Star.

The NCP, Jamaat-e-Islami and other parties are working together to secure the reform demands, he said.

“So far, no decision has been made to leave the alliance. If any discussion takes place on this matter, it will be made public,” he added.

Hamidur Rahman Azad, coordinator of the alliance and assistant secretary general of Jamaat, outright dismissed the possibility of a rupture in the alliance.

“We are jointly carrying out movements against the government and will continue to do so -- these are false rumours,” he said.

Explaining Jamaat’s position on local government elections, Azad said there is no scope for a central-level electoral understanding because of the scale of the polls, although local-level arrangements remain possible.

“We have made two things clear: that there will be no central understanding, but local-level understanding can be reached,” he said.

We’re open to nuclear energy deal with US

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“They [US] are eager to cooperate on peaceful nuclear energy,” he said.

The draft was then shared with the Ministry of Science and Technology, the official said, adding that it is up to the ministry concerned now to decide on the next course of action.

Bangladesh had agreements on civilian nuclear energy cooperation signed with the US in 1981 and then in 1993. However, they were not renewed.

“Cooperation can happen even beyond the MoU, but the fact that the US has shared a draft indicates its eagerness,” the official said.

According to the US State Department, Agreements for Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation or 123 Agreements, named after section 123 of the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, establish a legally binding framework for significant peaceful nuclear cooperation between the United States and its partners, providing a foundation for long-term, strategic civil nuclear partnerships globally.

US law generally requires a 123 Agreement to be in force before licensing significant exports of US-origin nuclear materials, including nuclear reactor fuel, equipment such as nuclear reactors, and major components, to another partner.

Bangladesh currently has a major nuclear power plant project with Russia. Rosatom is building Bangladesh’s first nuclear facility, the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant in Pabna.

The $13 billion project features two VVER-1200 reactors with a combined generation capacity of 2,400MW, with the first unit entering the final testing and trial power delivery phases.

Amid growing needs for energy supplies and rising prices in the aftermath of Middle East war, Bangladesh has sought more cooperation from Russia.

Foreign ministry officials said Bangladesh is seeking energy cooperation from any country that can provide support not only for the present but also for the future.

Benazir may have multiple passports

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The minister said the government was simultaneously pursuing diplomatic efforts to bring Benazir back to Bangladesh.

He added that the home secretary had spoken with the UAE ambassador, while the foreign ministry was coordinating with the UAE authorities on the matter.

Asked why the ex-IGP had been granted bail despite Bangladesh’s efforts to bring him back, the minister said he would not comment on the court’s decision without knowing the details of the order.

Benazir, once among the most powerful law enforcement officials under the ousted Awami League government, was arrested by Dubai Police on June 12 following an Interpol Red Notice requested by Bangladesh. More than one and a half months later, he was granted bail by a UAE court.

Meanwhile, a Police Headquarters official told The Daily Star that there had been no new developments from the police’s side. “The matter is no longer under the police’s jurisdiction. Communication is now taking place through diplomatic channels. Any further developments are likely to come from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.”

Benazir is facing multiple corruption cases filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission. Bangladesh has been seeking his repatriation from the UAE through legal and diplomatic channels.

A mid-ranking police officer close to Benazir told this newspaper that after being released through legal procedures, he is now attempting to leave Dubai for a European country.

Mob beats man dead

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rushed to the scene but were also allegedly attacked by the suspect.

Locals gathered in front of the shop after hearing the commotion, caught the suspected thief and beat him, leaving him dead at the scene, police said.

The three injured were taken to Ishwardi Upazila Health Complex for treatment.

Police recovered the body this morning and sent it to Pabna General Hospital morgue for autopsy.

“We are preparing to take legal action in connection with the incident,” the OC said.

Govt to use GPS to monitor staffers

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yet be monitored and analysed centrally, the document reads.

Hospital directors also reported that biometric attendance alone has not been sufficient, as some staff members leave their workplaces after registering their attendance.

To address the problem, the meeting proposed introducing geo-fencing to verify that doctors and health workers stay at their assigned workplaces.

The meeting also discussed integrating attendance data with the government’s IBAS++ system so that salary, leave, promotion and other administrative decisions are linked to attendance records in line with government service rules.

IBAS++ is the government’s Integrated Budget and Accounting System through which salaries and other service benefits are managed.

The meeting also proposed analysing attendance data from all government health facilities to identify the best- and worst-performing (five percent each) facilities, enabling authorities to take timely administrative measures.

The prime minister, at the meeting, said it was unacceptable for patients to visit government hospitals and fail to find doctors on duty, stressing that all officials and employees of taxpayer-funded institutions must remain present during official working hours.

He directed authorities to introduce an integrated attendance management system combining biometric attendance, geofencing and digital monitoring, and to establish a real-time dashboard to enable the central monitoring of attendance at all public hospitals every day.

As such, the meeting decided to make biometric systems fully operational and introduce geofencing within 30 days. Attendance records will be integrated with IBAS++, linking them to salaries, leave and promotions. Authorities will also rank the top and bottom five percent of health facilities by performance for incentives or disciplinary measures.

Contacted, Prof Pravath Chandra Biswas, directorate general of Directorate General of Health Services, said they have already instructed officials and heads of health facilities at the upazila, district and national levels to ensure the regular and documented attendance of doctors and health workers.

“We have informed them through official notices, online meetings and various seminars and are constantly encouraging them to ensure attendance is more regular and properly documented,” he said.