BLENDER'S CHOICE–THE DAILY STAR OTT & DIGITAL CONTENT AWARDS 2025

Three wins later, Vicky Zahed says he's only getting started

RAKSHANDA RAHMAN MISHA

For Vicky Zahed, the greatest reward lies in winning hearts, but a third Best Director trophy certainly makes the journey sweeter. At the ***Blender's Choice–The Daily Star OTT & Digital Content Awards 2025***, Zahed took home the honour for his web series ***AKA***, adding another milestone to his growing list of accolades.

Having previously won for ***Redrum*** in 2022 and ***Chokro*** in 2024, the director continues to strike a chord with audiences through his psychological dramas that delve into the complexities of the human mind.

"Winning for the third time makes the occasion especially meaningful because the awards have only been around for five years. Having three wins in that short period feels very special," he said.

The win also reinforced his realisation that audiences continue to expect more from him.

"I thought that after winning three awards, I might feel like signing off, assuming there was nothing more to achieve. But that feeling disappeared after the win because I realised how much people still expect from me," he said.

For the director, that trust is far more valuable than industry recognition alone. While winning an award is gratifying, he believes audience appreciation remains the truest measure of his work.

"I've never felt that I absolutely had to win an award. Of course, winning feels good. Why wouldn't it? Everyone likes receiving an award. But if I don't win, I have no regrets," he said. "However, the day I stop receiving appreciation from the audience, I would feel that something had gone seriously wrong."

With ***AKA***, the director turned his attention to the underdog, drawing on a familiar cinematic tradition of marginalised characters who eventually rebel against their circumstances. The character draws inspiration from films such as Martin Scorsese's ***Taxi Driver*** and ***Joker***, alongside English and Bangladeshi mainstream cinema.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

Rather than borrowing from a single source, Zahed describes ***AKA*** as a blend of different cinematic influences, shaped by the stories and characters that have stayed with him over the years.

"Whatever a director watches or reads influences them. That's simply how creativity works," he said.

His childhood experiences with television programmes and films, he explained, continue to inform his creative instincts. The emotions and images that left a lasting impression on him eventually find their way into his own storytelling, allowing him to pass those feelings on to audiences.

Among the most challenging sequences in ***AKA*** was the brutal murder of a pregnant woman who is innocent of the crime her killer believes she has committed. The scene was particularly difficult to shoot because of her innocence and the tender moments established between her and her husband earlier in the story.

Zahed also singled out the project's first intentional murder as one of his favorite sequences. As the character struggles to take a life for the first time, the haunting use of ***Beche Thakar Gaan creates*** a striking contrast between the song's message of survival and the violence unfolding on screen.

The performance, music, cinematography, and lighting came together to make the sequence especially memorable for the director.

The night became even more meaningful when Afran Nisho and Mehazabien Chowdhury won awards for his OTT projects ***AKA*** and ***Neel Shukh***. Celebrating alongside two performers, he deeply admires the recognition as a collective achievement.

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For Vicky Zahed, however, the three wins are not a cue to slow down. If anything, the audience's affection has strengthened his resolve to create better work. The challenge now is to live up to the expectations of viewers who continue to place their trust in him.

Kushum Shikder makes musical comeback with 'Probol Ghor'

Singer and actress Kushum Shikder has released a new original song, ***Probol Ghor***, marking her return to original music after nine years.

Kushum has written the lyrics, while Mahmud Sunny has composed and arranged the music. The song was recorded in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, it was not released at the time. The track has now been released with a music video.



Kushum last released an original song, ***Nesha***, in 2017. She said the response to that song encouraged her to release new music.

Directed by Nakul Sharker, the music video was filmed at several scenic locations in Cox's Bazar. It is available on Kushum Shikder's Facebook page and YouTube.

EVENTS

'Reimagining Waste'



Goethe-Institut Bangladesh is hosting ***Reimagining Waste***, an exhibition featuring creative works by PASCH students and five selected artists exploring the possibilities of discarded materials. Following a month of workshops and experiments, the students, mentored by Urukku Bangladesh, will showcase their ideas alongside the artists, encouraging visitors to rethink waste, consumption and their relationship with the environment. The exhibition invites audiences to look at discarded materials from a fresh perspective and consider how waste can be reimagined through art and creativity.

Date: Saturday | October 17–23
Time: 3:00 pm onwards (opening)
Venue: Goethe-Institut Bangladesh

NEWS

AI-driven review

FROM PAGE 14

marks, even though most of them do not deserve such high scores.

To move away from this, the ministry drew up the proposal to make the post-mass uprising civil bureaucracy more dynamic, accountable, efficient, and transparent, said several officials involved in the process.

Policymakers at the public administration ministry believe that if the new assessment model is introduced, it will promote "meritocracy" in the civil bureaucracy in line with the ruling BNP's electoral pledge.

"Work is underway to carry out necessary administrative reforms in line with our electoral pledge, and the initiative regarding a digital ACR is part of that effort," Bari told this correspondent recently.

The proposal does not explain how AI will be integrated into the government's digital civil service platform, the Government Employee Management System (GEMS). It also does not say whether any AI tools will be developed internally or purchased from a private entity for the integration.

GEMS is a centralised digital platform of the ministry, which stores and manages all human resource management data, including personal data sheets (PDS) of civil servants, and information on their leave, promotions, transfers, and online evaluations.

The proposal mentioned that the introduction of the peer review system will reduce reliance on intelligence reports about officers being evaluated.

It also noted that Pakistan significantly curtailed corruption in its revenue sector and boosted revenue by rolling out a peer review system.

HOW WILL IT WORK?

Under the proposed mechanism, an officer will be evaluated by 30 to 45 colleagues -- both superiors and subordinates from former and current offices -- on five key criteria: integrity, official conduct, leadership capacity, political bias and competence.

The evaluators will answer at least 23 questions across the five criteria.

An officer's integrity will be evaluated first, determining whether the officer is involved in corruption or displays a tendency to please superiors and others.

There will be an assessment of professional conduct towards superiors, peers and subordinates across current and previous workplaces.

Besides, leadership capacity will be gauged by evaluating the officer's ability to make swift decisions, outspokenness, courage and crisis-resolution skills.

Information will be gathered on whether the officer has campaigned for or against any political party or wielded political influence.

Lastly, professional competence will be assessed by examining the officer's capacity to make prompt decisions; commitment to simplifying public services; and whether he or she frequently changes decisions.

The evaluations will not involve any human intervention or manual handling. The GEMS module will randomly select 30 to 45 peers or evaluators for each officer every year, using algorithmic logic.

The identity of the evaluators and their feedback will remain strictly confidential and anonymous.

Links will be sent to the designated evaluators to submit feedback. AI will then process and analyse their feedback alongside digital ACR data. Based on the analysis, decisions regarding promotions, postings and training will be made.

The system's automated algorithm will identify unusually positive or negative reviews submitted out of personal bias or grudges, said officials of the ministry's Career Planning Wing.

This correspondent spoke to at least seven officers with ranks ranging from deputy secretary to additional secretary across three ministries. Almost all of them supported the initiative but expressed doubts about its implementation.

A deputy secretary at the LGRD ministry said inefficient officers have always wielded considerable influence in the administration, regardless of which party was in power. They are likely to resist the introduction of the new system, as the proposed peer-review mechanism could undermine their dominance.

Citing an example, an officer at the public administration ministry said that more than a decade ago, the then Awami League government moved to implement a new career development mechanism to streamline promotions and postings. However, the initiative could not be implemented due to opposition from a section of influential officials.

Implementation of such initiatives would reduce politicisation in the administration, which is why inefficient officials and those who benefit from the existing system would never want that to happen, the officer added.

Welcoming the government's move, public administration expert and writer Feroz Mia said, "Fundamental changes can be brought to the administration through the introduction of a peer review system, which will help the government select efficient officers [for promotions and postings]."

However, mere digitisation of the existing system will not bring much benefit, he added.

Israeli strikes kill 5 more in Gaza

REUTERS, *Cairo*

Israeli strikes killed at least five Palestinians in the Gaza Strip in two separate attacks yesterday, health officials said.

Medics said an Israeli strike killed four people near Panda Mall in Gaza City, while another killed one person in the Tuffah neighbourhood further south of the city.

Israel has stepped up strikes against the Palestinian territory in recent weeks, saying Hamas has been rearming and carrying out attacks in violation of the ceasefire. Hamas denies rebuilding its arsenal or planning attacks and accuses Israel of undermining a US-brokered ceasefire agreed a year ago.

Considering Makkah pact

FROM PAGE 2

partnership, he said bilateral relations should expand beyond their traditional focus on labour migration and remittances.

"While that foundation remains important, it cannot be the ceiling of our ambition."

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Bangladesh's economic transformation have created common interests in investment, human capital, technology and connectivity.

Discussions are underway on a possible investment fund to facilitate joint investments and partnerships in priority sectors, he said, while citing renewable energy, infrastructure, ports, logistics, agriculture, fisheries, food security, healthcare, pharmaceuticals, information technology and AI as promising areas for Saudi investment.

"The days of dependency are over -- we are now placing emphasis on an equal partnership and on sustainable practices."

Humaiun stressed the need to shift towards trained and certified professionals to meet the changing demands of Saudi Arabia's labour market.

He called for stronger cooperation among training institutions, universities and industries to ensure skills certification aligned with Saudi market requirements.

The welfare, dignity and rights of Bangladeshi workers in Saudi Arabia would remain a government priority, he said.

CNG driver confesses to rape, murder

FROM PAGE 14

her head into the mud with his foot to ensure she was dead.

According to police, Tazmin hired Sumon's auto-rickshaw from Paduar Bazar to Racecourse for Tk 300 around 12:30am on Thursday.

Sumon allegedly told her he would take a shorter route to her home. Instead, he drove along several roads before reaching the crime scene, Pankaj said.

When Sumon stopped the vehicle, Tazmin became frightened and tried to flee. As he attempted to restrain her, she screamed. He then allegedly strangled her with a gamcha.

After she grew weak, he raped her and pressed her head into the mud with his foot, the police official added.

Sumon then took an iPhone from Tazmin's bag inside the auto-rickshaw and fled. He later hid the phone beside a pond near Kachikata Mosque in Chapapur before fleeing to Chattogram, police said.

Police recovered Tazmin's body from a paddy field beside the Cumilla-Noakhali regional highway in the Jagatpur (Manumura) area of Perul Uttar union under Lalmai Police Station after receiving a call through the national emergency service 999.

Her father, Abdul Alim, identified the body after checking the live location Tazmin had shared at 2:52am. A Lalmai police team was already at the scene.

Abdul Alim told this correspondent that Tazmin left home on October 4, saying she was going to visit a female friend. She later travelled to Cox's Bazar with the friend before leaving for Cumilla on Wednesday night.

Outcry as Trump agrees

FROM PAGE 14

most damage on Trump and the Republicans as November's midterm elections approach.

Diesel is the main supply chain fuel, and a rise in its costs feeds into consumer prices and also hurts US farmers, who need it to operate machinery.

Democrats said the agreement undercut a law Trump signed last month allowing for a broad range of sanctions on Russian banks, officials and tankers, as well as directing him to impose steep tariffs on the top five importers of oil or natural gas from Russia. The law gave Trump wide discretion to make exceptions to its provisions.

Some Republicans also criticised the agreement.

"Propping up Putin's war economy is morally wrong as he uses that money to bomb cities," Congressman Don Bacon, a Nebraska Republican, wrote on X. "The President's policies towards Russia and Ukraine are failures. We need moral clarity not moral ambiguity."

The development comes weeks after Trump signed into law the Lindsey Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act, which gives him the power to impose tariffs up to 100% on countries like India and China that purchase Russian oil and gas.

JS body questions

FROM PAGE 14

by next February, but ministry data showed only 60MW had been added over the preceding 30 days, said Hasnat Abdullah, another committee member.

At that rate, he said, the target would be missed by a wide margin.

The committee has sought monthly progress reports and details of letters of credit opened for importing solar panels and inverters.

Under the incentive scheme, customers installing rooftop solar systems by February 28, 2027, will receive Tk 10.50 per unit for surplus electricity supplied to the grid until February 28, 2030, the meeting was told.

Hasnat said a 50MW rooftop solar project would ordinarily cost around Tk 150 crore, but the ministry had proposed spending more than Tk 350 crore.

The ministry has been asked to provide a cost breakdown for each project.

It also sought the planned generation mix for 2030, including projected demand and the shares of gas, coal, solar and nuclear power, and a timeline for shutting down idle oil-fired plants.

Hasnat called for a forensic audit of the Tk 2.89 lakh crore paid in capacity charges, saying only about 14,125MW of the 29,000MW installed capacity is being generated.

"We must pay capacity charges based on actual generation capacity," he said.

Nazibur said the ministry's presentation acknowledged mismanagement, corruption, and lack of planning, but did not report progress on an earlier investigation committee's recommendations.

The ministry was asked to explain the probe's findings and the steps taken after a High Court ruling on capacity charges.

The committee also sought measures to raise diesel reserves, which Hasnat said stood at only 31 days' supply, warning that disruptions could hit agriculture, transport and the rural economy.

Hasnat also criticised LPG market monitoring, saying consumers were paying Tk 2,500 to Tk 2,600 for a cylinder against a government-set price of around Tk 1,800.

Nazibur said the regulations needed for public hearings on energy prices had not been made effective in 23 years. The ministry said a draft had been prepared, but the committee did not get a satisfactory explanation for why it had not been approved, he added.

Lawmakers also stressed the need to speed up domestic gas exploration to reduce dependence on imported gas.

Committee Chairman Mia Nuruddin Ahmed Apu presided over the meeting, attended by Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Minister Iqbal Hasan Mahmud and State Minister Anindya Islam Amit.

Youth beaten to death over theft allegation

FROM PAGE 14

learned yesterday that an ambulance had brought Ripon's body to his home.

"As there were no documents accompanying the body, we took it back to Chanpara. There, we learned that Ripon had allegedly been beaten on suspicion of stealing a welding machine from a shop next to the brick kiln. Tk 20,000 had also been demanded," he said.

Robiul alleged that welding shop owner Rezaul Karim and Abu Talha Selim, the son of a former chairman in the area, led the beating.

"Ripon was found dead that evening inside the brick kiln garage where he stayed.

"We could not find Rezaul or Selim when we went there. Ripon had dark, swollen marks on his hands and back, apparently from beatings. Police also visited the scene," he added.

Siyam Ahmed, the ambulance driver who transported the body, said Selim had called for an ambulance around 9:00pm yesterday.

"When we reached Chanpara, they loaded the body into the ambulance and told me to take it to Ripon's home. But his family refused to accept the body. After waiting three hours, we returned to Chanpara with it. Police later told us to take it to the hospital at 3:30pm today," he said.

Contacted, Ibrahim Ali, officer-in-charge of Bogura Sadar Police Station, said, "We conducted an inquest and sent the body to Bogura Shaheed Ziaur Rahman Medical College Hospital for an autopsy. The cause of death will be known after the autopsy."

Asked whether anyone had been detained, the OC said, "We have not received a written complaint yet. Legal action will be taken against those involved once a complaint is filed."