COVER STORY

What it means to study film in Bangladesh

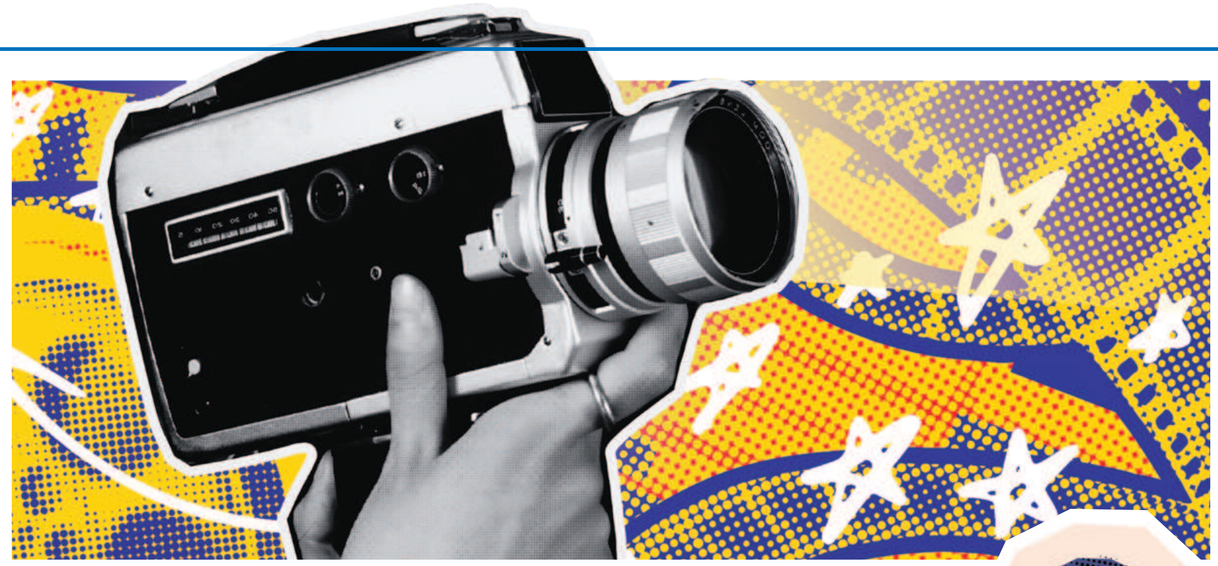


ILLUSTRATION : ABIR HOSSAIN

"Studying film in Bangladesh can seem like a risky choice, especially if you expect a guaranteed job after graduation. But opportunities do exist. I have not even finished my studies yet, and I am already working with a production house."



SHEIKH FABIHA AMREEN

Among the art that surrounds our lives, film is perhaps one medium with something for everyone. No matter their age or background, someone is likely to have at least one movie they like. As such, we might be bound to question what it actually means and what it takes to study in such a creative field.

The Department of Television, Film and Photography (TFP) at Dhaka University (DU) opened in 2012 as the Department of Television and Film Studies. A handful of other public universities offer dedicated film degrees. Among public universities, Jagannath University (JnU) has a Department of Film and Television, and Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University (JKKNIU) in Trishal has a Department of Film and Media Studies.

Among private universities, Stamford University Bangladesh's Department of Film and Media Studies has operated since 2004. The University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) offers a concentration in Digital Film and Television Production within its Media Studies and Journalism degree. Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) teaches film and production through its Department of Media and Communication, and Daffodil International University (DIU) runs a programme in Multimedia and Creative Technology. Outside formal degrees, Pathshala South Asian Media Institute remains one of the most respected names in photography education and also offers diplomas and short professional courses in film and television.

The government-run Bangladesh Cinema and Television Institute (BCTI) and private schools such as the International Academy of Film and Media (IAFM) offer short-term training in filmmaking, editing, screenwriting, and acting.

While looking into the discipline, one of the main questions I had was, how does one go about teaching another person a creative journey? It's not like other subjects that can be practised just through reading theory either. It's largely a practical field that requires you to be taught in the art of making a film.

As such, being a faculty member in such a discipline takes genuine love for both the art itself and teaching. Assistant professor at DU TFP, Saiyeed Shahjada Al Kareem's experience is unique, as he was one of the first graduates of the first-ever batch from the department at DU. He had to face a lot of judgement from society for his subject choice and his career path.

He says, "While studying here, I felt there are two types of people in this industry: those who study films and the art of it, and those who practise the art of filmmaking. There was always a gap between them. People who take too philosophical an angle forget how to create, and those who create tend to think people who aren't doing so don't have the right to judge any form of art. For a subject like this, if you think you will just teach, that would be a misconception. You have to teach students how to create, so you have to stay in touch with your practical skills. Even though I am a faculty member on paper, I am still in tune with my identity as a filmmaker. I am involved with my students' projects, and I know how the industry operates because we often collaborate with it. I still work as an executive producer, writer, and director, which I can then teach my students."

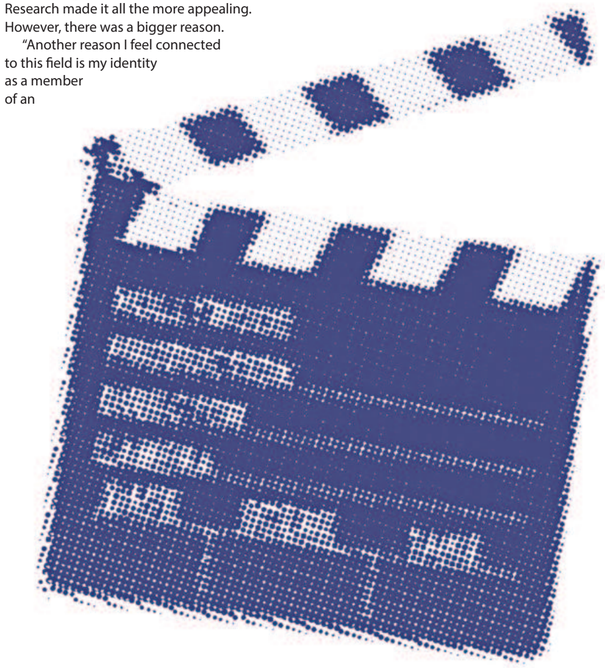
He also mentioned that a lot of students who are currently enrolled in university are already in the industry. Some have even attained recognition, getting their projects shown at different international film festivals.

One of these students is Shakib Hossain, who had one of his documentaries – *Silent Verdict* – selected for Bulgaria's Golden FEMI Film Festival. Rather than being heartbroken about failing to secure a seat at BUET, he decided to follow his childhood dreams and pursue an undergraduate degree in film. Shakib stressed that though he never had any experience with filmmaking, he still made his first short film during his first year at DU, for which he received the departmental award for best director. This was how he realised that the sky is the limit.

Maysainu Marma Lipy, a master's student at JnU's Department of Film and Television, first found the subject through music. Lipy has loved singing since childhood. As such, coming across a degree that offered courses like Music Research made it all the more appealing. However, there was a bigger reason.

"Another reason I feel connected to this field is my identity as a member of an indigenous community," Lipy says. "Our communities have many unique stories, cultures, traditions, and experiences, but they are not always represented from our own perspective in mainstream media." Lipy hopes to one day tell those stories through film. She finds the teachers cooperative and the alumni network fairly strong but feels a lot of it depends on how much initiative you take yourself.

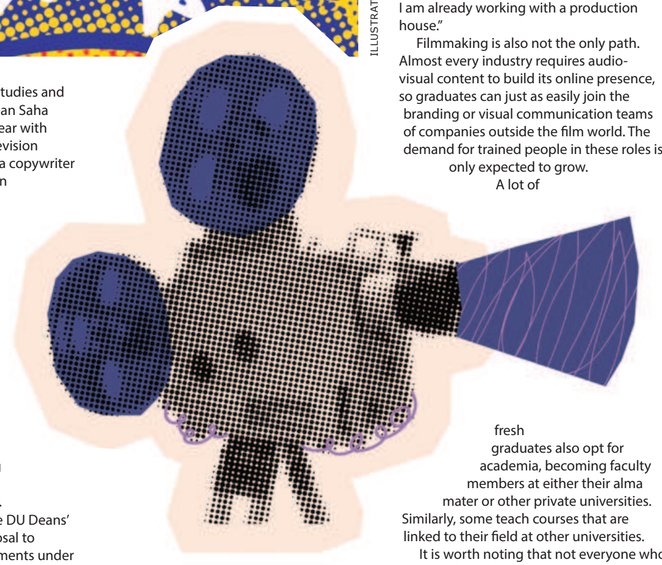
At ULAB, film is one of four majors under the Media Studies and Journalism Department. Anirban Saha Arpon graduated earlier this year with a major in Digital Film and Television Production and now works as a copywriter at Chorki while making his own films on the side. He did, however, express some concerns, claiming that when he joined back in 2022, the media lab didn't have proper or updated equipment. He also alleged that there weren't enough faculty members either, with some students struggling to find a supervisor for their projects. Things have, nonetheless, improved, with newer equipment, a screening room, and more experienced faculty members now in place.



Earlier this year, in June, the DU Deans' Committee discussed a proposal to merge TFP with other departments under the Faculty of Social Sciences, like Mass Communication and Journalism (MCJ) and Printing and Publication Studies, into one department. "There is a misconception that MCJ and TFP have the same curriculum," says Saiyeed Shahjada. He explained that TFP is a purely applied field compared to that of mass communication and journalism, stressing that their concentrations are different.

What disheartened him the most is how far behind Bangladesh is in the realm of creativity in the film field. "Right now, we are teaching television, film and photography under the same degree, yet other countries separate film itself into film studies and filmmaking," he elaborates.

Owing to a lack of funding, the department runs on a limited budget, so they cannot give their students much in terms of equipment or scholarships for their productions. A large fraction of that gap is accounted for by collaborations with the industry.



Students pitch their final productions to executives from organisations who are already active players in the film or TV industry, who then help fund or develop the projects they like. The department now works with the industry through both Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) and industry-academia collaborations.

Of course, life at TFP isn't only about classes and productions. Like most departments, it has its own clubs, but the one closest to the department's heart is the TFP Film Club. Nafis, an executive member of the club, stated that one of the most fun things they do is screen films every Thursday. "The screening is open to all, and sometimes we bring directors who share their journey with anyone interested in attending," Nafis says. The whole idea is to build a little community of people who simply love watching films.

But the question that probably worries students and parents the most is a simple one: will this actually get me a job? When TFP's first batch started out, the most common question its students faced was simply, "What do you even do?"

More than a decade later, that has changed to some extent. Sifat Rahman, who is currently doing a master's at DU TFP and was cast as Shakil in the *Bonolota Express,* says, "The first question is whether we can actually call the Bangladeshi film sector an 'industry' yet." With little structure and so few cinema halls across 64 districts, it's a fair question to ask. Still, Sifat sees people going back to theatres as a good sign, one that exists because of people who genuinely love cinema and continue making films despite everything. "Studying film in Bangladesh can seem like a risky choice, especially if you expect a guaranteed job after graduation. But opportunities do exist. I have not even finished my studies yet, and I am already working with a production house."

Filmmaking is also not the only path. Almost every industry requires audio-visual content to build its online presence, so graduates can just as easily join the branding or visual communication teams of companies outside the film world. The demand for trained people in these roles is only expected to grow.

A lot of fresh graduates also opt for academia, becoming faculty members at either their alma mater or other private universities. Similarly, some teach courses that are linked to their field at other universities.

It is worth noting that not everyone who gets admitted into these departments has a burning passion for the medium. Like most other departments, some have aspirations outside of the field.

Regardless of whatever it is that students aspire to do, it is vital that there is space for them to pursue and practice it. After all, the urge to tell stories is innate. Perhaps its greatest testament is the students, who persevere even in the face of the many hurdles that persist within the classroom as well as the industry. Though some progress has been made, work remains to be done, for many stories are left to be told.

Reference:
The Daily Star (July 2, 2026). *DU deans discuss proposal to merge eight departments into three.*

Fabiha wishes to sleep the sleep of eternity, yet has to be an active member of society. Give her funny reels at s.fabiha.amreen@gmail.com so that she can soldier on.