



# The Emotional Man

## Fame and Facts in Bangladesh

3300 Words

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There were facts. But the facts didn't matter.

Some are born famous. Some become famous for their accomplishments. And some are just famous for being famous.

In Bangladesh I was famous for no reason at all. And it would be more accurate still to say I was not at all famous. But people treated me like a poster-boy come to life – and that was before The Director gave me a role in his film.

The Director was famous for making bad movies. His films played up and down Bangladesh and brought

him national awards. Still, in the streets nobody bothered him. “All people love me, but nobody knows what I look like,” was how he explained it.

For me it was different.

Crowds gathered wherever I went. Shy students asked me to pose with them for a photo. Nursing mothers gave me their babies to hold. At Sufi shrines people forgot about their saints and fakirs and swarmed me instead. And smiling passersby gawked and pointed and winked at me in the streets. Foreigners are rare in Bangladesh.

I felt like a poster-boy, and the posters hung everywhere – movie posters that covered every blank wall in the country. They were complex, multilayered

lurid montages, these posters – a Bangladeshi brew of sentimentality and violence. The slinky seductress; the crying heroine. The furious villain; the emotional hero. The clenched fist; the raised revolver; the bloody knife. Brutality and melodrama; blood and tears.

The posters gave a burlesque carnival atmosphere to the concrete confusion of Dhaka – Bangladesh’s rupturing capital where a population approaching twenty million lives in a city built to accommodate perhaps one-third that number.

One night I watched one of these films, while people sitting near me in the musty cinema hall watched me instead. The movie was in Bengali – no subtitles. But the plot seemed unimportant – a musical love story with bad guys. Mawkish women; cartoon character villains; ransoms and car chases – cheap romance, gratuitous violence and rivers of tears. It was so bad it was brilliant – a difficult form to replicate for someone unschooled in the style.

Back on the street I paused to look at a promotional poster for the movie I had just seen. The hero – a guy not dissimilar to the young Elvis Presley – was crying; his face tilted up at an angle in a posture of supplication, brow furrowed, eyes reddened, rivulets on his cheeks. And there he was in the same tableau, standing with the heroine, holding her protectively from behind, while a pistol held by a smirking villain pointed at her head.

I tried to imagine the man who made movies like this. Did he take his work seriously?

A tangle of passersby stopped to look at me looking at the poster. Some of the men snapped photos with their mobile phones. Was I a star? It didn’t matter.

And anyway, it wouldn’t be long before I stood in front of the bright lights on the set.



*Lurid film posters lend a carnival atmosphere to bleak backstreets.*

I sat in The Actor’s car. Next to me sat The Actor. The car sat in traffic. And the traffic just sat. On the roadside a large billboard commanded: “Kill Your Speed Before It Kills You!” And somewhere in Dhaka sat a man with a sense of humor and an indifference to facts – the one who had the idea of placing such signs in a city where it sometimes took a full hour to travel the six or

seven kilometers that separated the movie studio from my hotel.

I had met The Actor some days prior as he sat smoking hashish in a dimly lit room in Dhammondi – an upper-class neighborhood. He had come to listen to the music of Bauls, a small mystic Bengali sect that worships the human being.



*Pedestrians, cars, buses and hundreds of thousands of rickshaws compete for space on Dhaka’s clogges streets.*

Bauls believe that the divine exists inside every person and can be discovered and experienced through a process of self-cultivation, refinement and inner knowledge. Bauls have no temples, no priests, no rituals and no formal worship. They don’t even have any scriptures. All the Bauls’ knowledge and philosophy are passed down through thousands of songs

– composed by Baul poets over the centuries.

And during one of the power blackouts that daily afflicted Dhaka, on the floor of a small brick house – an illegal construction on the roof of a decrepit high-rise



*Bauls, members of a mystic religious sect that believes the divine exists inside every human being, gather nightly in a house in Dhaka.*

– sat a small group of men illuminated by a shaft of moonlight filtering in through a window. The insistent beat of drums and the twang of ancient stringed instruments infused the air – already charged with the smoke of incense and drugs. Voices rose above the city chaos and the din of the traffic below – singing songs of transcendence and love.

The Actor was a tall middle-aged man with a mustache and mischievous eyes – Hindu, not Baul. But he liked Baul music – and Baul hashish. His brother sat nearby. “What do you do? Also an actor?” I inquired of the brother. “Oh, I don’t do a damn thing” he said seriously, “I’ve been retired since I was eight.” Next to him sat two men in uniform. In fact, Hashish had been outlawed years ago under American pressure. But

it was a traditional intoxicant in Bengal. The police came to smoke.

During breaks in the music The Actor entertained me with stories about his career and the movie industry in Bangladesh – “Dhallywood” people call it. I was intrigued, interested. “Then you must meet my friend – he’s a director,” The Actor offered. He paused for a second, and then added, “He’s very short . . . but very smart!”

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*Above the noise and neon of Dhaka a Baul plays on a rooftop.*

Within a leafy campus-like compound in central Dhaka lies the Film Development Corporation – Bangladesh’s first movie studio, created by the, then, East Pakistan government in the late 1950’s. Today it remains the heart of film production in Bangladesh and the largest



*At a film shoot actress Apu Biswas waits while Shakib Khan – “The King of Dhallywood” – applies tears to his eyes.*

studio in the country – releasing about one hundred films every year.

The Director was busy cranking one out when we arrived – shooting a scene outdoors.

On his tip-toes, he balanced precariously on a stool and peered into the camera’s viewfinder. Nearby stood the stars – two faces I recognized: Young Elvis and his love in the movie I’d seen.

My arrival caused a stir on the set. But it died down quickly. These people were used to celebrities.

The Director stopped the shoot, scrambled down from the stool and stood next to me. “You see how I’m suffering for art!” he announced dramatically, gesturing at the stool.

Standing on the ground he looked taller than a midget – but shorter than the film’s heroine.

Dark skinned, mid-forties, with fashionably rumped

hair, intelligent, sensuous eyes and a carefully manicured mustache, he exuded energy, good-humor and theatrical flair.

The Actor recited his friend’s credentials: Very Talented! Very Smart! Very Beloved By The People! One Of The Best Directors In Bangladesh . . .

“I’m not making many movies,” The Director interrupted. “In my life I’m making only ten movies. But every one a SUPERDUPER hit!”

The Actor’s head bobbed in agreement.

The Director continued: “Last movie I’m making called . . . he rattled off something in Bengali. In English it means ‘You Love the Girl, But Not to Marry!’” He gave me a moment to ponder the significance of that title, and then added: “Superduper hit!” He continued: “Before that, my film called ‘My Beloved Dear’ . . . Superduper! Everyone loved it.”

The movie now in production had the title “She’s



*Bangladeshi actors spend a lot of their time all teared-up. Here actress Apu Biswas cries like a monsoon.*

In My Heart.” The Director excused himself and climbed back on to his stool to finish filming the scene.

Young Elvis stood in front of the camera applying drops of water and glycerin to his eyes. In person he didn’t resemble Elvis so much. His co-star stood nearby. Water streaked down her cheeks and drops collected on her chin and dripped to the ground one by one.

It turned out they were the hottest movie couple in Dhallywood: Apu Biswas and Shakib Khan.

People called Shakib Khan “The King of Dhallywood”. He preferred simply “The King.” Just recently he’d had three movies released on the same day.

As for Apu, she was “number one movie heroine in Bangladesh,” The Actor certified. “Already she making 34 movies with Shakib Khan. . . . And five more coming out this year. . . . I think they getting tired of each other.”

I watched the shoot. All the action was in the crying. Shakib and Apu looking at each other crying. “Action!” Shakib looking at Apu, Apu looking away, crying. “Aaaaction!” Shakib addressing the camera, crying. Close-up of Shakib crying. Close-up of Apu crying. She was good – cried like a monsoon, just like in the movie I’d seen.

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The Director looked me up and down when he returned – as if sizing me up professionally. Then he said with a flourish, “Mr. Leo, I am very happy to meet you. Bengali people very emotional people. I am very emotional man. Now we are friends! I can die for you!”

Fortunately, for the moment he merely invited me for a drink in the studio canteen.

The following skit ensued with the waiter:



*The Director – “I’m not making many movies . . . in my life I’m making only ten movies. But every one a SUPERDUPER hit!”*

Me: Could I have a tea?

Waiter: Sorry boss, no tea. Coffee.

Me: Ok, bring me a coffee.

Waiter: Sorry, now no coffee.

So we sat sipping soft-drinks.

“I love my culture. I love my people. I love my country,” volunteered The Director.

“Bengali people very emotional people,” he reminded me. “I am very emotional man. . . . Me, I love everything! . . . Even this spoon!” he amplified, reaching over and withdrawing a teaspoon from a sugar bowl that sat on the table.

“Is that why there’s so much crying in your movies?” I asked him.

“Yes! You are very clever, Mr. Leo! Crying is a

symbol of love,” he explained. Then he paused, momentarily, for dramatic effect, and added: “When you leave I will cry!”

The sounds of Christmas punctuated his declaration – “Jingle Bells.” It was his mobile phone. The Director excused himself for a minute.

“So, who are your influences?” I asked when he returned, “I mean what directors inspired you to make movies?”

He became serious, pensive. For some time he sat looking at his beloved spoon.

The answer came as a question: “You know that American director and actor, the one who make funny films?”

I shrugged my shoulders, “Woody Allen?”

“No, no!” The Director parried. “Another one.”



*Movie shoot at the Bangladesh Film Development Corporation -- the largest movie studio in Bangladesh.*

“I don’t know, Mel Brooks, maybe.”

“No, no, you know that American comedian and director.” He turned to The Actor and some other people sitting in the canteen. They debated something in Bengali – people scratched their heads, rubbed their chins.

Finally The Director grasped it, “CHARLIE CHAPLIN!” he exclaimed, slapping the top of the table, sending his darling spoon to the floor.

I never knew if he was joking or serious. But perhaps Bangladeshi film-makers had a soft spot for the golden age of American cinema. Just recently, the director Iftekar Jahan had remade a Hollywood classic and released Banglar King Kong – The Bengali King Kong.

I watched the premier at the Purnima Cinema Hall. True to the original, Banglar King Kong’s plot centered on cross-species romance. But Iftekar Jahan had livened up the story with many song and dance numbers – regrettably, none with the giant ape himself.

The film also featured a chubby heroine wearing tight clothes (or sometimes a Little Red Riding Hood outfit), a hero armed with a rapier dressed like one of the Three Musketeers, savages wearing grass skirts and Viking-horn helmets, lots of coconuts and bananas, and a man in a cheap gorilla suit – “imported from the USA,” the press release bragged. The special effects made heavy use of cardboard and made the stop-motion animation of the 1933 original seem sophisticated by comparison.

Even the local press pilloried the production. “To everyone’s chagrin, cinema in Bangladesh has reached its nadir,” announced one national daily.

Things had been different before. In the 1960’s and ‘70’s Bangladeshi directors made many films based on literature, folklore and history. Films examined social issues: class and religion, the inequitable treatment of women, exploitation of the poor.

But those were different times – times of heightened national and political consciousness. It was an era of



*Bangladeshi movie directors eschew politics and social issues like endemic poverty and instead put out endless action and romance movies.*

Bengali nationalism and the struggle for independence from Pakistan. Millions died during the war; more than ten million refugees fled across the border to India – the largest migration in human history. Crying was not just a symbol of love. Then came freedom and cultural revival, and a generation of directors told meaningful, powerful stories.

But at some point the facts ceased to matter. Some say the increasingly violent and corrupt political climate caused the change. Others say it was the arrival of home video, satellite TV and international programming. But by the late 1980's the genres of cheap-thrills romance, action and fantasy came to dominate film. Important issues – religious radicalism, persistent poverty, overpopulation, environmental degradation, political violence – no longer appeared on the screen.

This was the movie-land landscape The Director inhabited. But it was difficult to say whether he knew that he made schlock films and just did it for love and money or whether he took himself seriously. Perhaps

he just didn't care. One moment he lamented the lack of culture and the next moment extolled his triumphs in cinema.

"I am a poor man, but Bangla people love me. Everyone love me," he suddenly announced to the whole canteen.

"Of course they love you," I agreed, "you've made seven superduper hits."

"Ten superduper hits," he corrected.

"But," he went on, "in Bangladesh today there is no culture. Many people just watch bad TV."

"But some say the movie industry is part of the problem with the culture."

He looked at me.

"People complain that the scripts are weak – nothing but violence, melodrama, cheap romance and sex."



*Cheap romance, melodrama and violence -- the ingredients of most commercial films in Bangladesh.*

“Not sex!” he objected. “Not possible sex. Even we are not having kiss. In India now they are having kiss, but Bangladesh is Muslim country. Even we cannot show leg above the knee.”

“But why don’t you make some different kinds of movies? Political movies or movies about Bengali culture – about the Bauls for example?”

“Ha! Now not possible in Bangladesh to make political movies. Today one party in power, you cannot make movie that says something bad about them. And if you make movie about opposition party, then they make problems for you when they’re in power. Not possible controversial movie.”

“And films about Bengali Culture?”

He laughed. “No producer will give money to make Baul movie. I am socialist. I don’t care about money. I make movies for love – because I love my people. But no one will give me money to make movie that is not romance or action.”

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We talked. Night descended. And the power cut out, as it did every evening when twenty million people switched on their lights.

So we went outside and made our way to Stage Three in the blackness. A small entourage followed along.

“You know, Mr. Leo! The moon is more useful than the sun!” announced The Director, as we fumbled along side by side.

“Why is that?”

“Because you need the light more at night.”

The entourage chuckled.

“Mr. Leo,” he continued, “I am falling in love with you. Have you considered acting in film?”

I demurred.



*A villain in the Dhallywood movie “She’s In My Heart” bugs out his eyes to look extra fierce.*

We stopped by a dressing room. By then the auxiliary power generators came to life, and the lights went back on.

Inside the dressing room stood a tall, curly haired man wearing a red frock, white trousers and pointy shoes. “Ilias Cobra,” he introduced himself. “I am action actor. Black belt. I kill many people.” Then he mimed cocking a shotgun and blasting an imaginary person who lay on the ground. He smiled broadly and demonstrated a brisk side-kick into the air. Then he added, “I learn Kung Fu in Myanmar.” People admired international credentials in Bangladesh.

Nearby a make-up artist powdered and painted a bored

looking woman – Chanchala Chanchu. “I am actress, poet and painter. . . . I had exhibition in Russian Cultural Center in Dhaka,” she told me.

The Director rolled his eyes when we stepped away.

Out of earshot he whispered, “Ask her if she is also rock star, samurai and a surgeon.”



*Action actor Ilias Cobra practices side-kicks in the dressing room.*

Three actors loitered around looking villainous. One had a big silver “\$” belt buckle that could rotate within its mount, and he stood there absent-mindedly spinning it round and round. It looked

funny; I smiled at him, but he stared at me blankly. The

villains remained permanently in character – stone-faced even when the cameras weren’t rolling. In fact, they didn’t look much different acting; their main



*The Director and his star Apu Biswas cast long shadows on the set of “She’s In My Heart”.*

talent seemed to be the ability to look kind of fierce – bulging out their eyes.

“Before Shakib we had Ferdous . . . but now he is alcoholic. His popularity is near zero.”

“Mr. Leo,” said The Director, “you should act in my movie. I make you world-famous in Bangladesh.”

“And before him?”

“I’m already famous,” I objected. “Anyway you have Shakib Khan.”

“Shakib Khan getting fat,” The Director said sotto-voce. “I think he has diabetes.”

“You’ve worked with him for a long time?”

“Years.”

“And who was the number one hero before Shakib Khan?”

“In the 90’s number one hero was Salman Shah. He was very emotional man. He hang himself.”



*A discotheque scene shoot on Stage Three.*

On Stage Three set designers had transformed the space into a tropical-themed discotheque, complete with grass thatched huts, lasers, smoke machines and a bar set in the middle of a pool of water. A gaggle of Bangladeshi teenagers – extras – milled about, ready to bring

the disco to life.

The Director’s assistants scampered around getting



The author with actress Chanchala Chanchu at a Bangladeshi movie studio filming a scene for the superduper movie "She's In My Heart."

things ready to shoot the scene, while the Director set about persuading me to appear in his movie.

I knew nothing about acting, but of course that didn't matter – neither did most of the actors working on these productions. I let myself be persuaded, and he wrote me into the script on the spot.

My role didn't require much rehearsal.

This was the setup: Chanchala Chanchu plays a good Bangladeshi girl. She has never visited a discotheque and finds the very idea offensive – good Bangladeshi girls don't frequent such places. But the boy she loves is in some sort of trouble with the mafia. To save her love Chanchala must meet a gangster type in the discotheque and hand

over to him a pile of cash. Unbeknownst to her, a hoodlum who fancies her has also followed her to the disco.

Now my part: I'm sitting at the bar in the disco – music pounding, people dancing. I'm drinking a beer, smiling, smoking a cigarette and having a good time. (Close-ups of me having a good time.) Chanchala Chanchu walks up next to me at the bar and gives a wad of bills to some guy. Suddenly the thug who's in love with her appears with two other villains and begins molesting her. And then the valiant foreigner turns to the thugs and says, in English: "Hey! Leave the girl alone!"



Young Bangladeshi actress, an extra for a discotheque scene.

That was it. It required several takes. It was the end



*I wasn't a star. But it didn't matter. Foreigners are rare in Bangladesh, and wherever I went all eyes were on me.*

of my part and the end of the scene. I never found out what happens next.

I sought out The Director to say goodbye.

“Mr. Leo,” he proclaimed, “our friendship is short, but it casts a long shadow. . . . You must come back to visit.”

I thanked him and assured him I would. Then I set off for the exit.

“Don't forget about me Mr. Leo,” was the last thing I heard him call out as I walked away, “If you don't return I will cry.”