

## Early Life of an Accidental Actor: Before Nayak Raj Razzak

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### Abstract

To Bangladeshis, Razzak or *Nayak Raj Razzak* is the glamorous film star who is pride of this nation. His fans may know all of his characters, memorized each song, cherish every single of his romantic scenes, and kept track of his achievements and accolades acquired over a lifetime. However, how many are aware of the trials, tribulations, and numerous hardship he had to overcome in the early part of his career to taste that success? *Nayak Raj Razzak* before attaining the iconic status was merely Abdur Razzak. That is why, whenever he is documented by the mass media, he constantly reminds us of his past and the struggles he went through. The background of Razzak's early life helps us to comprehend how he honed his talent while performing in *natok* (stage drama/play) for various clubs, theatre groups, and PTV (Pakistan Television), acquired theoretical/practical knowledge of being in front and behind the camera, and became a thespian even before finding success on the silver screen. This paper documents the early life of Abdur Razzak before he became a cinematic legend.

### Keywords

*Restless period, accidental actor, teen actor, thespian, rajput to refugee.*

### Prologue

The common thread that combines mass communication, film studies, and linguistics is 'discourse'. The conformity of these three disciplines, which complement each other, assists in the discursive construction of a cinematic legend. These disciplines have hardly been combined in conducting a multidisciplinary research, particularly in the Bangladeshi context. This paper combines the three in order to explore, document, and discursively construct the life of the thespian Abdur Razzak, before he became the hero, the heartthrob, the star, the cinematic legend, *Nayak Raj Razzak*.

When I conceived of writing this article in May 2016, I knew very little of Razzak's earlier life, which is the case with most people that I have spoken to who have idolized Nayak Raj. It took me more than one year of communication, negotiation, cancelled and rescheduled appointments to set up an interview with this cinematic icon, mainly because he was sick, abroad and/or attending official functions. I finally got the opportunity to interview him on July 1 2017 at his home *Lokhikunjo*; this was a godsend interview, as he passed away just a month later. To millions of Bangladeshis in this country and around the world, *Nayak Raj Razzak* represented and still represents the Golden Age of Bangladeshi cinema. So naturally, his death on 21 August 2017, though not unexpected, came as a shock to everyone.

## Critical Implication

*Nayak Raj Razzak*, which can be literally translated as ‘Razzak, the king of heroes’, is arguably the most famous actor from the Golden Age of Bangladeshi cinema. He has attained a legendary status, with some having called him a living legend. He has reached the pinnacle of cinematic heights that is unrivalled by others in Bangladesh. For well over 50 years, he has been in front and behind the camera, making films, giving interviews and entertaining us. In spite of this, there is no major empirical research on him. Books that have documented the history of Bangladeshi cinema have merely mentioned some demographics of his life and work (see, Hayat, 2017; Ziad, 2010; Hayat, 1987). The rich body of work that he has left us deserves to be empirically investigated, published, and academically taught in institutions of higher learning, particularly in the discipline of media and film studies.

Even though *Nayak Raj Razzak* has always been in the media from the heydays of his film career, all the media outlets have not collectively documented him until his 75th birthday and after his death. In spite of such focus by the mainstream media, on those and numerous other occasions, we still do not have a comprehensive picture of his early life. Mass media has not chronologically documented by the intricate details of Razzak’s life. Record of his life and work has been portrayed by the mass media like a montage or a jigsaw puzzle, in bits and pieces. Therefore, this paper took the bold initiative to empirically document and piece together the dishevelled unwhole to create a meaningful whole, which is imperative to comprehend Abdur Razzak, the artist, the thespian, the star who became a cinematic icon and a living legend. Therefore, my objective in this paper is to look at the life of Abdur Razzak, before he became *Nayak Raj Razzak*. In other words, I want to document his early life through the media, prior to making a big splash on the silver screen, that is, before Razzak assumed the role of *Nayak Raj Razzak*, the title given to him in 1972 by Ahmed Zaman Chowdhury, the editor of *Chitrani*.

## Literature Review

The 1970s saw the rise and social acceptance of Bangladeshi popular cinema as being the main form of entertainment, when *Nayak Raj Razzak* was the unrivalled film star. Due to this social acceptance of popular cinema, Kabir in 1979 made a prediction regarding the loyalty of Bangladeshi cinema audience by saying, “Bangladesh will certainly be among those few countries where the cinema will probably continue to survive even when it will have moved into the museums of other countries” (Akhter, 2014a, p. 50). A decade later in 1989, despite various challenges in filmmaking, Kabir again reiterated his confidence in ‘a great audience’:

Decades-long negligence found this region totally lacking in primary filming equipment, film production know how (sic.) of any kind or level and, worst of all, minimum capital for investment in film production. But what it never lacked was a great audience.

However, it seems that the blind faith Kabir (1979, 1989) had in the audience seems to have been proven wrong, as he utterly undermined the advancement and impact of technology on viewership. Viewers do not seem to throng the cinema halls anymore; in fact, due to loss of profit, halls seem to be turning into malls. Today, the film industry is in an unhealthy situation in Bangladesh. In other words, Bangladesh Film Development Corporation (BFDC) is not making quality films to cater to the needs of the audience, and commercial film production has decreased. There could be a number of reasons for this. Bangladesh once had around 1600 cinema halls, which has been reduced to approximately 350 to 320; the

main reasons are due to low quality of films, introduction of soft porn as ‘cut pieces’, bad conditions of cinema halls, the impact and influence of satellite television/channels, changes in audience taste and viewership, just to name a few (see Chowdhury, 2016a; Chowdhury, 2016b; Roy, 2016; Akhter, 2014b; Raju, 2011; Mokammel, 2009). Furthermore, vulgarity in contemporary films has increased tremendously since the days of the Golden Age of Bangladeshi cinema. The declining interest in Bangladeshi films has resulted in an ongoing blame game between cinema hall owners and film directors (see, Chowdhury, 2016a; Chowdhury, 2016b). The appeal of Hindi culture and availability of Bollywood and Hollywood films in cinema halls and homes have further alienated popular Bangladeshi cinema (see Alam, 2010; Hasan, 2008; Raju, 2008; Raju, 2011; Raju, 2012; Ullah, 2010). Initially it was the VCR (videocassette recorder), followed by satellite television, and subsequently the digital revolution in the forms of Web 1.0 (Internet), Web 2.0 (social media), and smartphones, just to name a few, have changed how audience view cinema and the media.

Good scripts, good directors, good actors and actresses seem to be lacking in the mainstream commercial film industry. The field of ‘Film Studies’ is at its infancy in Bangladesh, with insufficient empirical research, and hardly any academic books and articles. In the same vein, research on *Nayak Raj Razzak* is rather scarce. There is no empirical literature on this iconic artist. The few books on him are very personalized with exaggeratory narratives, and therefore may be questioned as to the authenticity of the information contained by them: *Shoronio Razzak* (Remembering Razzak) (Babu, 2017) and *Razzak O Choloচিত্র* (Razzak and Cinema) (Babu, 2000). In September 2017, a couple of weeks after the death of *Nayak Raj*, it was publicized by BPL that to commemorate the life of this extraordinary artist would publish a book on him written by the film director Chhatku Ahmed titled *Nayak Raj Razzak: Tollygunge Theke Dhallywood*, and would be launched at the Amar Ekushey Book Fair in February 2018. This book like the previous ones would be a personal account of the writer based on his relationship with Abdur Razzak. A few film historians (Hayat, 1987; Hayat, 2004; Hayat, 2017; Mokammel, 2007; Nasreen, and Haq, 2008; Ziad, 2010; Alam, 2011) who have written on the history of Bangladesh films in general do not emphasize on *Nayak Raj*. If the books have a biographical section, Abdur Razzak’s demographic information is mainly emphasized, that is, in terms of his date of birth, birthplace, filmography, and so on. None of such books talk about the artist Abdur Razzak, as well as the significance and impact of *Nayak Raj Razzak* on the film industry of Bangladesh.

Since the late 1960s until late 1990s, almost everyone in Bangladesh knew *Nayak Raj*, and cinema played a significant role in the day-to-day lives of the ordinary people. Its reflections were apparent on rickshaws, baby taxies, trucks, roadside tea stalls, and so forth, which were adorned with bright, colourful hand painted pictures and/or scenes from popular Bangladeshi cinema. Even though Nasreen and Haq in 2008 claim that cinema as a form of popular culture is reflected upon peoples’ lives as a primary entertainment source, the impact and significance of Dhallywood and its films seem to have declined since the 2000s. Popular or mainstream cinema of this country no longer has a vicelike grip on the common people as the main source of entertainment. As already mentioned, due to cable television and the digital revolution, interest in popular cinema has declined significantly in the new millennium. Since the relevance of Bangladeshi popular cinema has declined socially, its significance in academia is probably unlikely to flourish in recent years. Consequently, content of the mainstream commercial cinema is hardly emphasized from historic, creative and critical

<https://bdnews24.com/entertainment/2017/09/09/bpl-to-bring-out-bangla-film-legends-biography-nayak-raj-razzak-tollygunge-theke-dhallywood>

perspectives, in film studies programmes and courses in institutions of higher learning of this country. Therefore, empirical studies on artists like Abdur Razzak may not be the concern of the present generation of academics and researchers, who tend to be more interested in thriving film industries like Hollywood, Bollywood, as well as world cinema, and overlook the significance of Dhallywood, Dhaka film industry and the artists of the Golden Age of Bangladeshi cinema.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative research design and employed textual analysis (Bainbridge, 2008; Bainbridge, 2015; McKee, 2003) to analyze the mass media documents and an in-person interview, to discursively construct Abdur Razzak's early life. Bainbridge (2008, p 224) states that "textual analysis is a *toolkit* for examining the media, applicable to very simple media forms (such as advertisements), up to more complex forms such as news narratives, television series and films." In textual analysis, as McKee (2003) explains, plausible interpretations of a text include 'educated guess' as well. Components of textual analysis comprise framing the text, intertext, and specific tools for specific types of texts (still image, moving, written), including content analysis and discourse analysis (Bainbridge, 2015). Textual analysis is suitable for analyzing films, conversations and the mass media. In this study, it is employed to analyze mass media, new media and social media texts on *Nayak Raj Razzak*, as well as the conversation of an in-person interview with him on 1 July 2017, a month before his death. Mass media content data from 2012-2017 was gathered from the press media, electronic media, as well as new and social media in terms of the following categories: documentaries; TV news reports/talk shows/interviews; print and online newspaper articles; Web 1.0 (New media/ Internet) and Web 2.0 (Social media) sites. The data also included specific TV programmes on Abdur Razzak like *Nayak Raj Razzak er Shathe Kotha and Channel i Nayak Raj Razzak's 75 Birthday* (live), among others. Furthermore, a two-hour unedited audio footage of a documentary on Razzak was also analyzed. The unedited documentary footage was gathered from Bangladesh Film Archive (BFA) in July 2016.

### **Discursive Construction of Abdur Razzak's Early Life via Mass Media**

There are quite a number of famous or well-known personalities named Abdur Razzak in Bangladesh. However, there is only one *Nayak Raj Razzak*, the title given to the actor Abdur Razzak by Ahmed Zaman Chowdhury, Editor of *Chitrali* (see Ferdous & Shazu, 2016). It seems as if the stage name supersedes the actual name in case of this actor. Abdur Razzak, alias Nayak Raj Razzak, is the most famous actor in Bangladesh from the Golden Age of Bangladeshi cinema, yet there is not a single major empirical study on him or his body of work. Nor has his life's work been documented in a sequential manner in English so as to provide a platform for empirical knowledge at the global stage for researchers and graduate students specializing in the areas of film studies and/or media and mass communication. The contribution of mass media in representing Bangladeshi cinema artists, in particular Abdur Razzak, is underresearched and hardly documented in English. Since, no empirical research has been published on him till date, all the information that are available regarding this star are from the mass media. This section documents the early life of Abdur Razzak through the lens of mass media, and traces his life before he attained the status of *Nayak Raj Razzak*.

In order to document the film star Abdur Razzak's life before stardom, his early life has been discursively pieced together from the above mass media documents (see Methodology section) in the forms of print and online newspaper articles, documentaries, online pages and

podcasts, television programmes, news, interviews and discussions on and with him. In order to portray his early life in a realistic manner, many local lexical items and expressions used by him particularly during his interviews have been employed in the narrative below. For instance, terms and expressions like the following: *jamidari business* (land business), *Mollah paribar* (religious conservative family), *gramer bari* (village house), *proja* (peasants/subjects), *boro dha* (eldest brother), *medgho dha* (middle brother), *jolsha* (singing/musical function), *jatra* (village theatre/drama), *ganer ashor* (singing of musical session/function), *parar lok* (community folks/people), *natok* (stage drama/play), *tiffin hour* (snack break), *Saraswati Puja* (worship of goddess Shahashati), *'toke deea hobe'* (you'll be able to do a good job), *'hobe, toke deea hobe'* (yes, you'll be able to do a good job), *stri vomika borjito natok* (drama without women/wife), *kishor nayoker choritro* (character/role of boy hero), *Bharat Mata or Bongo Mata* (mother India or mother Bengal).

### **Life in Calcutta: The Early Years**

Abdur Razzak was born into a rich family in Naktala in Tollygunge of Kolkata on 23 January 1942, towards the end of World War II. The atmosphere of war was still quite fresh. He grew up in a landed gentry's family. Razzak had five siblings, two brothers and three sisters, all older than him. His father had a *jamidari* business. Razzak's family was a very conservative *Mollah paribar*. In Tollygunge, their family was quite well known. His family had houses in the city as well as in the village. The name of the village was Boral, which is next to Narendrapur. His father's *jamidari* business was there. They had huge amounts of land there. They also had a *gramer bari* (village house) there, which was made of clay with tin roof. No one used to stay there. At the beginning of each winter, the entire family used to spend about a week or so in the *gramer bari*. Razzak's father had lots of love and respect for his *proja* (peasants/subjects). He used to organize *ganer ashor* (singing function) and *jatra* (village theatre/drama) for them. Razzak used to ride on the horse driven carriage along with his father when they went to the village.

Since Razzak was the youngest among his siblings, he was the darling of the family and everyone loved him, as is common in a typical Bengali family. Love and care was showered upon him. However, his happiness was cut short with the demise of his parents in his early childhood. When Razzak was only eight years old, his father died, and within eight months of his death, his mother had passed away too. His life from then onwards was quite restless, while he was living with his two brothers. In 1952, a couple of years after the death of his parents, his *boro dha* moved to the *gramer bari* in Boral. At times Razzak lived with his *boro dha*, and at other times with *medgho dha*. Since he was the darling of the family, and in the absence of his parents, there was no one to control him properly. During his teenage years he used to go off to places for days.

### **Mollah Family with Weakness for Culture**

Later on he was offered other roles/parts by various drama groups in his community as well as other communities. Since his family, particularly his father, was quite conservative, he emphasized that he probably would not be able to take up acting if his parents were alive. However, Razzak recalls that even though his parents were conservative, his father had an open mind regarding art and culture. His father was a very cultured person, despite being conservative. Razzak clearly remembers that his father used to send the women of the family to the cinema hall in enclosed horse-driven carriage to watch films. He was very small, and used to sit on the laps of his mother and aunts. He recalls that *Mane Na Mana* was probably the first film he watched in the cinema hall with his family members. The film was a 'superhit',

and later he heard that it created 'havoc' (in the positive sense) in Kolkata. When his father arranged *jatra* (village theatre/drama) at their village house in Baral his *boro dha* would also arrange *jolsha* (singing of musical session/function). This brother, though not a professional, was a very good singer, and used to sing *gazzal* and *kwali* (specific genres of music/songs). *Parar lok* (community folks/people) were fans of his *boro dha*, who would sit with them during (*ganer*) *ashor* (singing function) that lasted almost the entire night. Razzak's *medgho dha* had good connections with theatre and film directors.

### Running Wild: The Restless Period

After the death of his parents, Razzak's restless period began. As he was the youngest among his siblings, and the darling of the family, he became uncontrollable, because no one was able to control him like his parents. Since his family was quite rich, with lots of landed property, his brothers at that time, as Razzak puts it were, in a 'tug-of-war' regarding *shompotti* (property). He did not like his brothers' competition regarding property, and bickering over *shompatti*, so he used to avoid this debate. His way of dealing with this was to run off to places. As everyone loved him, he used to be a very carefree adolescent. Since the demise of his parents, Razzak used to suffer from '*udashin frustration*' (careless frustration). It was during this period that he ran away from home three times. Once he even stayed in a jungle for a few days.

At the *jamidari bari* (landed gentry's home) in their village, Baral, *shautal* (a particular tribal group) community came to work during the winter on the land belonging to Razzak's family. They again left during the summer. He jokingly mentioned that it was at that time he used to go off to different places. He even went to Bombay three times. The third time he went to study at Filmaloy, but before that he left for Bombay on two other occasions and stayed there for about 10 days to one month. He used to leave because he did not like it at home without his parents. He became indifferent and isolated. Running away from home became a habitual practice. He used to do this to feel *moner shanty* (peace at heart). Sometimes he used to go to various places like *Digha*, *Darjilling*, and so on.

### The Accidental Actor

Razzak's school days were happy. He was a very sociable individual, and loved to play sports, particularly football. He was the goalkeeper of his school team. His school was quite famous. Even though it was a co-educational school, boys and girls studied during different shifts; the morning-shift was for girls, which started from 7.00, while the boys studied during the day shift, which began from 11.00 am. During *Saraswati Puja* (worship of goddess Saraswati) the girls took part in various cultural activities. The boys only engaged in poetry recitation, and a few of them sang songs.

Razzak claims that he came to acting by accident. When he was in Class-VII of Khangura School, which was quite famous, all of a sudden that year the games teacher Rabindranath Banerji, after talking with the 'Head Sir', decided that the boys would also stage a drama. Razzak did not pay that much attention to this, as he was busy with school and *parar* (community) football. As the school was looking for 'artists' (i.e. actors), all the boys were called during the *tiffin* (snack break) hour, and to Razzak's surprise the game's teacher told him that he had to act. He was taken aback. He recited, but never acted before in his life. When he was trying to steal away from the meeting, the game's teacher said '*toke deea hobe*' (you'll be able to do a good job). The 'Head Sir' also urged him to act. Even though Razzak had never acted before, he did have a latent fascination as some famous actors lived near his

school. Adjacent to his school lived Chobi Biswash, on the other side lived Ovi Bachan, and on another side Manju Dev. His school was in the middle of these three renowned actors' houses. He had seen them act, and liked their acting. Furthermore, others like Pijush Bosu, Tomon Sinha, Operash Elahi (father of Buppy Elahi). In other words, Razzak's school was located in the middle of a group of people who represented part of the cultural hub of Kolkata.

The title of the play for which he was selected was *Bidrohi* (Rebel); it was a *stri vomika borjito natok* (drama without women/wife). He does not remember the name of the writer, but mentioned that at that time *stri vomika borjito natok* was available in Kolkata. Razzak recalls that he did not know whether it was his fate or not, but he was told to play the role of *kishor nayoker choritro* (character/role of boy hero). After rehearsal on the first day in the presence of all the teachers and the boys, he was sceptical regarding his ability to act. But he was again reassured 'hobe, toke deea hobe' (yes, you'll be able to do a good job). This is how Razzak came into acting. After the drama was staged, he heard from others that his acting was good. This not only motivated and spurred him towards acting, but also gave him the confidence that he could actually act. In the meanwhile, he continued to study and concentrated on his football.

In Razzak's *para* a gentleman called Jyatirmoy Chakraborti was a very culture-oriented individual. There was a club named *Shakti Shango*. Now it is a big club, located in a five storied building. They used to organize *natok* (stage drama/play), once a year. In Kolkata at that time there was a custom of organizing *natok*: '*Paray paray natok, bichitro onushtan hothai thaktho*' (cultural activities, drama in different communities used to be constantly organized). This was a common trend as soon as it was winter. Jyatirmoy Chakraborti was arranging a *natok at Shakti Shango*, which he himself had written; it was called 'Notun Ihoodhee' (New Jew). It was based on the refugees from the East Bengal. In that *natok* there was a character of a youth aged 14 or 15, who is from a poverty-stricken family; his father was unemployed and his brothers did not help with the family earning. Therefore, this boy, who worked as a hawker, helped to maintain the family. Razzak was given the role of this character. Even though he was apprehensive in playing this part, Jyatirmoy Chakraborti, who had seen Razzak's previous *natok*, reassured him that he would be able to justice to this character. He now had the experience of acting in two dramas, one at school and one in his *para*. Thus, he became a familiar face. This caused a problem in his family. Even though his parents were not alive at that time, his siblings and their husbands and wives raised objections. However, it was his *medgho dha* (middle brother) who vigorously supported him. Consequently, Razzak became encouraged by this show of support, and continued to chase his passion.

Pijush Bosu, who was a renowned film director, at that time used to be very busy with *natok*. Razzak had a very close relationship with Pujush Bosu for a number of reasons. First of all Pijush Bosu was part of the *para* where Razzak lived. Secondly, Pijush Bosu's house was right next to his (Razzak's) school. The third reason was he (Pijush Bosu) saw *Bidrohi* (Rebel), Razzak's debut in the *natok* where he played role of the protagonist. Furthermore, this renowned film director was a friend of Razzak's *medgho dha*.

Pijush Bosu had a club called *Rongo Shobha*, which was drama club for adults. For the talented youths of 12 to 16, he opened a branch called *Torun Tirtho*, and the president of this club was Chhabi Biswas. Razzak was rather fortunate to have learnt recitation from him as he was a member of his (Chobi Biswash's) other club. Chobi Biswash used to teach every Sunday. Razzak was offered to join *Torun Tirtho*, which he joined; because by this time he

had become obsessed with *natok*. Pijush Bosh had written a *natok* for his club called Rupkotha (Fairytale). It was a beautiful *natok*, which could have been made into a film. In fact, Pijush Bosu once mentioned that he wanted to make it into a film. Razzak was given the role of a blind youth called Rupok. Towards the end of the play Rupok's eyes were washed with the heroine's blood and he was able to see. The regaining of sight symbolized *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) or *Bongo Mata* (Mother Bengal). The *natok* ended with the young generation declaring war against the British. After numerous rehearsals it was staged. It became quite famous, and in Kolkata alone it was performed between 15 to 20 times at different venues. After the success of this drama, Razzak became so addicted to *natok*, that he became somewhat detached from his studies.

### Ventures of a Teen Actor

It should be mentioned that even though initially Razzak did not care that much about acting, and concentrated on football, he subsequently left this sport due to two reasons. The first was, after the success of *Rupkotha*, he developed an addiction towards *natok* and acting, and the second was a dangerous incident on the football pitch. During the semi-final of a competition an infamous striker of the opposing team intentionally hit him very hard on the chest. Razzak was hit so hard that he not only became unconscious immediately, but remained in that state for almost seven to eight hours. Razzak's family also became a little concerned about football craze, as well as some of his friends. After this incident, and due to his growing passion for *natok*, Razzak started to think of his safety and became apprehensive as a goalkeeper. He emphasized that once a goalkeeper become scared, it becomes very difficult for him to stand at the goalpost and perform his job properly. Subsequently, after that traumatic experience, coupled with his obsession for *natok* made him let go of football.

The phenomenal success of *Rupkotha* made Razzak more known in the *natok* circle. After *Rupkotha*, he was offered the chance to act in adult dramas. In other words, he was picked up from *Torun Tirtho*, the youth *natok* club, and invited to join *Rongo Shobha*, the *natok* club for adults. In those days, big names like Shondha Ray, Dilip Chakraborty, Rasharaye Chakraborty, Lily Chakraborty were the film artists who acted here. Initially they gave Razzak a minor role. Then Pijush Bosh gave him a role in *Mouchotta* (name of a *natok*), which was staged numerous times. At that time Razzak played small roles, and gradually became immersed in the world of *natok*, appending a lot of time at the club. He used to light hurricane lamp, bring tea for the actors, gave proxy for various actors during their absence. Razzak liked to give proxy by being the understudy, as this gave him a chance to act frequently in the *natok* of the adults. Consequently, he got to learn the lines of all the characters. In fact, at that time one had to memorize all the lines in order to act. This continued for a while. Meanwhile, he passed his SSC exam, even though he did not study that much.

Being a teenager, in his mid-teens, Razzak could neither be given particular roles of an adult nor a child. He however kept in touch with numerous people from the inner circles of *natok*, and as Razzak himself admits that he has been quite 'lucky' to be able to earn their love and respect. As he had a very good relationship with Uttam Kumar's brother Torun Kumar, who used to act at *Rongo Shobha*, he was able to visit Tollygunge, the Kolkata Film Studio. However, Pijush Bosh had strictly ordered Razzak not to visit 'studio para', that is, Tollygunge, the Kolkata Film Studio and act in films by taking on the roles of child artists. Anyway, one day, during midday, Razzak went to Tollygunge, where Torun Kumar was acting in a scene. It was there during tea break that Torun Kumar introduced him to Ajit Banerjee, and mentioned that Razzak was quite a good actor who acts in *natok*. At that time

Ajit Banerjee, who was directing a film titled *Ratan Lal Bangali*, requested him to play a minor role in his film. The film was about children from *bosti* (slum) who were abducted, made blind and/or crippled and turned into beggars. Razzak initially declined, saying that Pijush Bosh had told him not to act in films. Torun Kumar insisted the Razzak should accept the role, and that Pijush Bosh would not know about this. As Razzak also had a hidden passion, he accepted the minor role. He went to the *bosti* (slum) for a couple of days, where the scenes were shot, and liked the experience. When Pijush Bosh heard of Razzak's minor roles as child artist in the films he seriously rebuked him (Razzak). Pijush warned him that if he acts as child artist, he would never be offered major roles later on, and be able to pursue his dreams of becoming a star. He gave the example of Sukendash (a previous child artist), who despite being a good actor was never given the opportunity of becoming a *nayak* or hero. He remained a child artist. Despite this warning, Razzak, besides *Ratan Lal Bangali*, acted in minor roles in a couple of more films like *Ponko Tilog and Shila Lipi*. After these films he did not play minor roles in any more films as a child artist. Furthermore, though Razzak worked on Ajit Banerjee's *Atotuku Asha*, and played a prominent character in it, the film remained incomplete and was never released.

### Road to Becoming a Thespian

In 1959 Razzak went to Bombay to study acting in Filmaloy, which was a studio owned by Shosuda Mukarji, who was a producer and director. In his studio, he established a film institute in order to create film artists. Puna Film Institute was not established yet. Mr. Naiher was the Principal. Sometimes Dilip Kumar used to go there. There were only a few students at that time. Among them were Asha Parekh, Joy Mukherjee, Razzak, and a renowned villain. Though it was a one-year programme, Razzak studied for nine months, as he had to return home due to his family's *pira piri* (objections).

Razzak's intention of going to Bombay was twofold: to study acting at Filmaloy, and look for opportunities to work on films. However, again his drawback in terms of finding work was his age. At 18 or 19 years old, he was still a teenager. It was difficult for him to work in films; the characters would not suit his age. When Razzak returned home, Pijush Bosu scolded him a lot, and explained that *Bangalider jonno* (for Bengalis) Bombay was not a good place. Pijush Bosu advised Razzak to act in *natok*. So, he again started *natok* and became completely immersed in it. He resumed acting at *Rongo Shobha* again. He did lots of *natok* for other clubs on request, as well as travel *natok*. He even started a *shongsta* (organization/group) in his *para* (community).

### The Ultimatum: 'Either Stop Acting or Get Married'

As he became obsessed with theatre acting and *jatra* (village theatre/drama), his family members became quite concerned about his reputation; and how this might affect the family's image. They did not like him acting closely with females. As he grew more and more popular, his female fans also grew in numbers. Razzak's family called a family meeting, and gave him an ultimatum: 'Either stop acting or get married'. They thought that if he got married, at least he would not fool around with any woman—whether actress or fan—as he would have a wife. Hence his, and subsequently the family's reputation would not be tainted. Razzak's passion for acting was so intense that he agreed to get married on the condition that he would be permitted to continue acting. He was married in 1962, at the tender age of 20. On the very night of his wedding, he told his wife the condition regarding his marriage to her. His wife did not object to his passion for acting. She knew that he was an actor, and had even seen his performance on several occasions, prior to their marriage.

### **Crossing Over: “I Came Here as a Refugee”**

In 1964 the political turmoil had progressed to Kolkata. Even though Tollygunge was not a racially volatile area, particularly between Hindus and Muslims, this part had been caught up in the racial riots. The entire community where Razzak lived had been destroyed and/or burnt. Even though some people started rebuilding their houses, he was determined to leave. Initially he wanted to go to Bombay and try his luck in the film industry there. However, Pijush Bosu stopped him by saying it was very difficult for Bengalis, especially Muslims to be successful in Bombay. He suggested that Razzak had a better chance of becoming successful in the relatively new film industry in East Pakistan. After discussing with his wife, and handing over power of attorney of his property to his family, Razzak, his wife and their eight-month baby, Bapparaj, left for Dhaka in East Pakistan in April 1964. “I came here as a refugee”, were his exact words. In the middle of the night his family crossed the border at Shimulia, where they spent the night and went by bus to Shatkhira, and then to Jessore. After spending a night at Jessore camp, they left for Dhaka by train and got off at Fulbaria Station, and then to the incomplete stadium. From there they went to Mirpur 12 and spent a night there.

### **Struggles of Life in East Pakistan**

Life in East Pakistan was a real struggle. After crossing the border, entering into East Pakistan, and then arriving at Dhaka he and his family spent a night at Mirpur 12, as mentioned above. The very next day he went to Komlapur, and after exploring for a while he not only got to know of Mr. Jabbar Khan’s (film director) address but also found a place to rent at the end of Komlapur Station, called Kazi Villa; the rent was Tk 80/= per month. He brought some money from Kolkata, with which he paid an advance for one month. The place that he rented had a room, a kitchen and a toilet. After bringing his wife and child, Bapparaj, to the house, he went to Fakirapul Bazar and bought groceries and cooking utensils. The following day, he went in search for Mr. Jabbar, who upon hearing all the details from Razzak, invited him to go to his office, Iqbal Films. Subsequently, Razzak was offered a job as the fourth Assistant Director. Despite his reservation, as he came to Dhaka to become film actor, he took the position because he needed a job and had to provide for his family. One day while drinking tea at Mannan Hotel in Malibag with Mr. Jabbar’s relative, Khoka, they overheard a conversation about *natok* (drama) among some artists. Khoka introduced Razzak to those *natok* artists, who afterwards invited him (Razzak) to come and see them during their rehearsal. Razzak, after an initial audition was made the hero of that *natok*.

Razzak continued his work as fourth Assistant Director Iqbal in Films, and perfor in *natok*. Then one day he unexpectedly met Rahman, an established film actor at that time, who gave him (Razzak) some sound advice. He told Razzak that since he (Razzak) wanted to become an actor, he would never get the opportunity to become a hero, if he continues to work behind the camera. Khalil, another established film actor of that time, gave a similar advice to him. After hearing these things, he felt rather uncomfortable. Though Razzak felt rather uneasy working behind the camera as an Assistant Director, despite the fact he wanted to act in front of the camera, he took that job because he had to take care of his family. He did not get much of a salary, but whatever he got, he somewhat was able to make both ends meet. He recollects that there was a boy called Shiraj who was brought from Karachi in order to make him into a hero. He also started as an Assistant Director and was later became Chief Assistant. Razzak started wondering whether his fate was leading him towards that same direction. Then one day he decided to quit his job as Assistant Director. He continued to act in *natok* and couple of Urdu films, when he started to run out of money. He became hopeless and was quite desperate. He could easily have written to his brothers in Kolkata and bring plenty of money;

but he did not do that as he had a big ego. He was in a very difficult position at that time—this was his period of severe struggle. Since Razzak could not do anything in Komlapur, he moved to a tin house in Farmgate, opposite Ananda Cinema Hall. In the meanwhile, he kept in touch with everyone in the acting industry. He also went to Zahir Raihan, who was very busy making a film, to discuss his prospects of acting. After the initial meeting, he told Razzak to see him later on. Razzak went on a Sunday, which was an off day, to Zahir Raihan's house who after discussion told him to return after a week without shaving or combing his hair. Razzak did as he was told and returned after a week. Upon seeing him, Zahir Raihan told Razzak that he would cast him as the main protagonist, that is, hero in his film adaptation of the novel *Hajar Bachar (Thousand Years)*. Razzak became so elated that he became 'half mad', as he expresses in his own words; he was so fortunate to be cast as a hero in his debut Bangla film. Therefore, he kept in touch with Zahir Raihan.

In the meanwhile, Razzak's financial status became dire. It was difficult to find work at that time. Zahir Raihan was the only one who promised him a role in a film. There were numerous occasions when Razzak was figuratively speaking thrown out of studios by directors for requesting opportunities to act in films. He refrains from naming names, as he does not want to embarrass anyone. After roaming around for a while for work, he had no choice but to go to Pakistan Television (PTV), which was launched at that time. He gave an audition for an anchor to read Bangla news. Since his Bangla was very good, he was selected on the spot. As he was leaving the studio, he met Jamal Ali Khan, who used to work there and had connections with the film world. He scolded Razzak and told him not to join as a news anchor, promising him some kind of work in cinema within the next couple of days. Razzak listened to him and awaited his opportunity. A couple of days later he was invited by Jamal Ali Khan to a meeting at PTV in DIT building, where Razzak was offered a part in a new commercial *natok* titled *Garua*, which was to be aired on television. He clearly remembers that he used to get Tk 65/= per week, and this was his only income to take care of his family. Sometimes he had to walk from Farmgate to DIT in Motijheel, just to save money, as he already had two children by that time. Therefore, his life of struggle went on. He kept performing in the PTV drama, and kept in touch with Zahir Raihan. One day while he was leaving after a rehearsal at DIT, he met an acquaintance called Zakaria who told him that Zahir Raihan was looking for him. When Razzak went to Zahir Raihan's office, the entire film crew was there. Upon seeing Razzak, Zahir Raihan said that he was frantically looking for him (Razzak), and that he had decided to be cast him (Razzak) as the hero in the film *Behula* (1966). Razzak became dumbfounded and could not say anything at that moment. He was told to sign the contract immediately with signing money of Tk 500/=. Later he was given Tk 5,000/= for the film.

### **Break at Last: but Still Uncertainty**

The starting of the *Behula* project was ominous. The day Razzak went to the studio to begin shooting of the film, the songs were being recorded. It was at this time the producers, who were not happy with him (Razzak) being made the hero, asked Zahir Raihan why he (Razzak) was selected as male leading role when there were more experienced and established heroes. Zahir Raihan was resolute in his decision and said that without Razzak as the hero, he would not make the film. So, Razzak started work on his debut Bangla film with trepidation. Razzak felt very nervous initially as he was amongst seasoned and established

<sup>2</sup>BTB (Bangladesh Television), formerly known as PTV (Pakistan Television) was launched on 25 December 1964, and was located in the DIT (Dhaka Improvement Trust) building at Motijheel. DIT was replaced by RAJUK (Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha) on 30 April 1987.

film artists. For the first three days, he just sat at the shooting spot with full makeup. Then on the fourth, Zahir Raihan told Razzak that his (Razzak's) shooting would begin. Razzak's scene began with a song. After footage of the song was shot, Zahir Raihan edited it within two days, called all the producers for a screening, and then asked them whether he had made the wrong decision by casting Razzak as the hero. The producers were very happy with Razzak's work, and it was then that he (Razzak) gained more confidence as the leading male character. After the release of *Behula*, it became in Razzak's words 'super-duper hit' that attained 'silver jubilee' status. When a film runs for a continuous period of 25 weeks, it is considered as silver jubilee. The state of Bangla cinema was deplorable at that time, and directors were constantly making Urdu films. Yet, despite competitions from Urdu films, *Behula* ran for continuous 27 weeks at Star Cinema Hall. However, he mentioned that initially there were still questions as to whether he would do well in a modern film, as *Behula* was based on a mythological story based on folk traditions. This was a rumour among other directors. Noticing Razzak's melancholic sombreness, Zahir Raihan inquired. Since Razzak trusted Zahir Raihan the most, he is the only director to whom he (Razzak) had shown all his certificates and told him about his dreams of becoming a film star. Razzak opened up to Zahir Raihan explaining that other directors would probably not consider him (Razzak) for roles other than a folk hero, he became so emotional that he actually broke down into tears. Zahir Raihan consoled him. In the meanwhile, two films were in, the pipeline—*Anwara and Agun Nea Khala*; their scripts were being prepared and songs were being recorded. Zahir Raihan asked Sumita Devi whether she is casting Razzak as the hero, and became disheartened when he heard 'no'. Consequently, Zahir Raihan himself quit from the production of *Agun Nea Khala*. He reassured Razzak not to worry, and they left for the shooting of *Anwara* in Sirajgong. Since the shooting of this film was completely on location (i.e. Sirajgong), they did not return to Dhaka. Eight to ten days into the shooting Sumita Devi and Nurul Haque Bacchoo went to the shooting spot, where Razzak was requested to return to Dhaka to work on *Agun Niye Khala*. When Zahir Raihan heard this from Razzak he smiled and said, 'What did I tell you when we were coming.' Razzak was given the permission to work in both films simultaneously. He used to do the shooting of *Anwara* during the day, and then take the night train to Dhaka. The following morning, he would work on *Agun Niye Khala* and again at night board the train to Sirajgong. This is how he completed both the films. Both of the films were hits. *Agun Niye Khala* played in the cinema halls for 28 weeks continuously, and *Anwara* became a critically acclaimed film, winning numerous awards. After the success of *Behula* (1966), *Anwara* (1967) and *Agun Nea Khala* (1967), Razzak became so busy that he did not have time to look back at his career. And the rest is, as they say, history.

## Finally

When I finally got to meet the iconic actor, I was probably more relieved than awestruck. There is such a lengthy history behind this meeting. I requested a reporter from the newspaper New Age to help me get in touch with Razzak. As this reporter, Ziaul Hasan, was my student, pursuing his MA in English Language Teaching degree from East West University, had taken several of my courses, he honoured my request. On 20 May 2016, he gave me the cell number of the youngest son of Razzak, Samrat, whom I contacted that very day. For the next couple of months, I talked with almost everyone in Razzak's household numerous times, including him, his wife, his brother-in-law, Samrat as well as his wife, just to get that one elusive interview. In most instances, Razzak due to his illness was unable to give me a suitable time. On 15 January 2017, a seminar on Razzak's life and work was being organized at Bangladesh Film Archive. Dr. Fahmidul Haq, of Department of Journalism, Dhaka University, informed me of this. As I would be leaving for Singapore to attend a

conference on 14 January, I sent my wife, Rubina Chowdhury, and daughter, Saima Haque, to attend the seminar. At this seminar, among film historians, critics, scholars, directors, Rahim Newaz was also present; he is the director of the film *Moner Moto Bou* (1969), where Razzak played the leading role. My wife took his cell number, in case it might come in handy later on. After exhausting all avenues to get an interview with Razzak, a couple of months later, that is, in June 2017, I got in touch with Rahim Newaz. After visiting him on two occasions, I requested him to set up an appointment with Razzak. Finally, on the third day of *Eid-al-Fitr*, on 1 July 2017, I along with my wife picked up Rahim Newaz, his wife and his daughter-in-law, and went to Razzak's house *Lokhikunjo*, in Gulshan.

I may have been the last person to interview *Nayak Raj Razzak* on 01 July 2017, just over a month and a half, before his passing on 21 August 2017. Just to cut a long story short, even though there were so many questions I did not get to ask, due to the nature of the meeting, I got answers to some questions that have never been covered by the media. I got the scoop of what he actually said to his new wife, Lokhi, on their wedding night (*bashor raat*). Razzak told his wife that he did not want to marry, as he was already married. After hearing this Lokhi became apprehensive and nervous. He then said that he was married to *ovino* (acting) and *natok*. *Ovino* and *natok* would be his first wife, and Lokhi could be his second wife. If she was agreeable to this condition, there would be no problems in their *shongshar* (conjugal life). Lokhi had no problem with such a relationship, and Razzak throughout his entire life, and even during my interview, paid homage to his wife by acknowledging her contribution to his success, and that without her steadfast support he would never have been able to achieve what he has accomplished. During the interview, I also got him to confirm some of the other information of his early life that I read in snippets in various news articles and interviews.

Because Razzak was so amicable, endearing and made me feel at ease, I gathered the courage to ask him about a rumour that I have been hearing regarding a fight he had had with Ahmed Zaman Chowdhury, the man who gave him the iconic title *Nayak Raj Razzak*. At Dhaka club, Razzak and Ahmed Zaman Chowdhury had an intense argument regarding Shabnam. At one stage the verbal fight turned into a fistfight. Consequently, Ahmed Zaman Chowdhury was hospitalized, and Razzak accompanied him to the hospital. Since they were 'bosom friends', the following day they made up again. In fact, they were so close that Razzak mentioned Ahmed Zaman Chowdhury would come to his house every Saturday and leave on Sunday; they were great friends and had mutual respect for each other. Despite this incident, Ahmed Zaman Chowdhury bestowed the unofficial title *Nayak Raj Razzak* upon Razzak in a publication in *Chitrali* in 1972. When Razzak inquired why he was given this title, Ahmed Zaman Chowdhury said that he (i.e. Razzak's) deserved it. The reasons why Razzak probably deserved the title may have been because of his acting, popularity, quality of his films and his versatility, all of which were unrivalled at that time. During my interview with Razzak, he acknowledged that Ahmed Zaman Chowdhury was a serious and committed film journalist, the likes of whom is difficult to find nowadays. Razzak felt honoured and proud of the title *Nayak Raj*, but never acted egoistically or showed his arrogance because of it (i.e. the title). He went on to say that, now people do not write 'Abdur'; they all use the title *Nayak Raj*, including the government of Bangladesh.

Another interesting fact became apparent during my in-person interview with Razzak, particularly when I approached to take a picture with him. He revealed that even though Zahir Raihan was such an integral and instrumental part of his career, and provided a safe haven during the Liberation War, which may have saved his life, he does not have a single photograph with the renowned director. At that time Rahim Newaz also mentioned that

despite the fact he has known Razzak for such a long time, ever since directing the film *Moner Moto Bou* (1969) where he (Razzak) played the leading role, he does not have any picture with the legendary actor. That long awaited picture was finally taken on that day. In fact, every time Razzak got an opportunity, whether in-person and in media, he expressed his gratitude and payed homage to the people who helped him to become a success in his profession. In particular, he seemed to mention his wife Lokhi for her constant and unwavering support which started from the very day of their marriage, Zahir Raihan for giving him (i.e. Razzak) his first big break as a hero in Bangla cinema and for inspiring Razzak to believe in himself, as well as Ahmed Zaman Chowdhury for the title *Nayak Raj* that paved the way for him (Razzak) to achieve such an iconic status in Bangladeshi cinema which has yet to be rivalled.

### **A Star is Born: Need for Empirical Research**

Before *Nayak Raj*, Bangladesh had famous actors, like Rahman, Ujjal, Anwar Hossain, Golam Mustafa, Fateh Lohani, Sayed Ali Imam and so on, but no star(s). None of his contemporaries, or even those who came after him, has been able to rise to the heights that he has. *Nayak Raj* is the first film star of Bangladesh, who was like a superstar of even a megastar in this country. He is arguably the only star who is perceived as a larger than life persona based on a combination of factors: he was a fashion icon, a trendsetter who carved out his own acting style, and had the chemistry to be compatible with all of the leading ladies of his time (e.g. Kabari, Shabana, Bobita, Shuchanda, Shujata, Rozina), as he was the romance king. Furthermore, he played wonderful and lovable ‘*gunda*’ (gangster) characters. *Nayak Raj* is also the first action hero of Bangladesh cinema with his portrayal of a ‘*gunda*’ in *Rangbaaz* (1973), which is considered to be the first action film of this country. There are myriad dimensions of this ‘accidental actor’ that could be investigated empirically, revealing the multidimensionality of his personality, his acting and body of work, to better comprehend the heydays of Bangladeshi cinema. However, for any researcher and/or academic, who wants to study Abdur Razzak, whether it is his life and/or work, it is imperative for him/her to become familiar with the early life of this film star and cinematic legend. Without a research venture of this nature, record of his early life would not be documented in an empirical manner. The passing away of *Nayak Raj Razzak* on 21 August 2017 should not be considered as his final act. Rather it should be hailed as the beginning of empirical research not only on him and his extensive body of work in front and behind the camera, but also on the Golden age of Bangladeshi cinema, the era that made him into a superstar in the Bangladeshi context.

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