



Akramul Momen

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Akramul Momen (Born 15 Nov 1990, Dhaka, Bangladesh) is an interdisciplinary artist, author and journalist. Their research interests include: contemporary art and activism, queer theory, gender-based discrimination, post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD, myth, history and reconstruction, impacts of religious radicalisation, social justice and rights based issues.

In 2014, They completed their post-graduation in Bengali Literature and Language from Jahangirnagar University. They are a trans-disciplinary performance artist and their work focuses primarily on the body and the relationship between identity politics. For past few years, they are mostly exploring the issue of gender identity, and the socio-cultural concerns that relate to gender practice of identities in a heteronormative society. Creativity has always been an integral part of their work; be as an art producer or an art activist. Exploring different contemporary media for years, particularly performance, film and research they have heightened their confidence in making conscious aesthetic choices as an artist.

In 2018, Akramul initiated an independent platform named Tehai: An Interdisciplinary Art Initiative. It aims to pilot new approaches to the contemporary art scenario of Bangladesh. It embodies a crossover between several disciplines and offers an independent stage for artistes. It is also available to rent or collaborate on workshops, rehearsals and performances.

Akramul worked with several national and international organizations as like as British Council and Goethe Institut in several art projects. He performed at Rainbow Carnival in Kolkata in 2017, at ODBUT, a UK-based queer Bangla group in London and took part at 'Training for the future' initiative in Germany in 2019. They are one of the awardees of the Goethe Institut's 'Future Beyond the Self' initiative.

Akramul believes art as an activism. They think it is their own responsibility to work for the oppressed of the society and create platforms for the survival of deprived communities. As a queer people in Bangladesh, Akramul experienced a tremendous social oppression just because of their own sexual orientation, that's why sexuality and gender equality are two major aspects of their works. Now all of their efforts strive to build a liberal space and a free society for all.

Directions

Jadur Shohor

A play for sexually diverse people

To commemorate the International Human Rights Day 2015, Akramul directed the theatre in association with Boys of Bangladesh or BoB, currently which is known as Oboyob-Diversity Circle. It is the country's first-ever queer stage drama filled with comedy. It's an effort to see sexuality, love, rights and contemporary issues from a different angle. The story talks about myths, superstitions, harassment, media representation of sex, stereotypes of gender roles and many more issues.

'Jadur Shohor' is a play with few self identified LGBT authors and performers. Given the culture of Dhaka, we had tried to push the boundaries a little aiming to reach out to a larger audience.



Images of 'Jadur Shohor'

শাড়ী উপাখ্যান (The Tales of Sarees)

A research-based performance based on a dancer called 'Chukri'

শাড়ী উপাখ্যান (The Tales of Sarees) is a research-based dance performance based on Md Sherebul Islam's life and coexistence in the society, introducing the dancer who came for a residency from Bheramara, Kushtia at Tehai. MSI is a Chukri dancer and the dance performance is all about narrating the life of a dancer called Chukri under the 'Future Beyond the Self' project, supported by the Goethe-Institut Bangladesh.



Images of Saree Upakhyan

Filmography

The Reincarnation

A take from the gender-fluid names of Allah

'The Reincarnation' is a performance art film based on gender fluid names of Allah found in Asma-ul-Husna which take both masculine and feminine attributes. The narrative of the performance is independent and it derives from a very personal question that struck me in my childhood, is Allah Queer(?) as He (why not She) is considered by Muslims as the one who knows everything and created people with all sexual diversities?

<https://youtu.be/4zSnvsTXxsY>

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1aBqPNQg7WXjnxkkm5b0cZuulHluBkWrl?usp=sharing>



Image: The Reincarnation

Deer from the hell

Adopted from the novel 'Nona Gang' by Bhandari Arif

A woman deep inside his mind
A woman deep inside her mind

'Deer from the hell' is an experimental take on Bhandari Arif's novel 'Nona Gang'. The literary piece is essentially a series of conversations among sexually marginalised Bangladeshi youths where the characters are not agreed to accept the so-called narration of gender. It was presented later as a recital performance to mark the second anniversary of Tehai in 2019.

<https://youtu.be/XnfBWkL7Cx8>

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1N1OEP6MSPeg1_3yVgMcoZAcXd2fSP7jw?usp=sharing



Images: Deer from the hell

Performances

Agni Mangal

A performance art initiative by Tehai

Agni Mangal is a research-based performance art initiative based on the fire god Agni. Following the description of Agni in Vedas and Kathasaritsagara by Somadeva, they bring the character out of western frameworks such as bisexuality, third gender, LGBT, rainbow et cetera which are mostly generated from their disrupt Eurocentric approach. In addition to that, they welcomed opinion from every people and took experiences from the online dating apps to question masculinity and its construction in our society, exploring various colours found itself in Agni.

<https://youtu.be/tnZJUdOZjnM>



Image of Agni Mangal

Prayer of a leaf

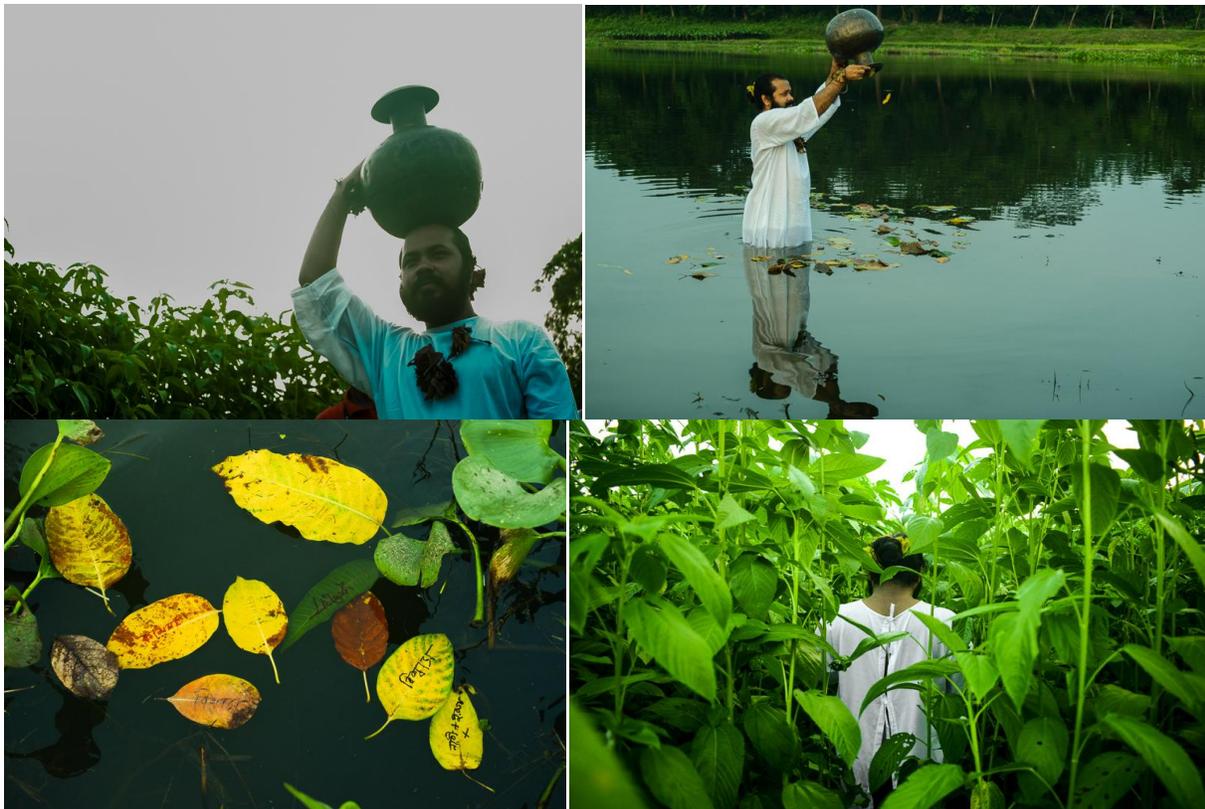
A performance art initiative by Tehai

'Prayer of a leaf' is an experimental performance inspired by 'Baraiya', an old ritual performed by the Hijra community of Bangladesh. The ritual is performed 12 days after castration for the well-being of the castrated person. After worshipping god Bahuchari Mata (Hindu goddess Bahuchara Mata) in the midnight, a group of Hijra people, including the castrated person, head to the Ganges River carrying a milk pot, lemons and a chicken. The castrated person smash a lemon at every single point on the street and pours the milk into the Ganges praying for a safe and steady urine stream. She then exchanges her clothes with a tree and leaves the chicken on the street after turning it seven times around the head.

Inspired by the ritual, Akramul Momen heads to the Brahmaputra River on barefoot carrying a pot of dry leaves protesting the cutting of trees at Dhaka's Suhrawardy Udyan and all over the world. They leave a dry leaf under every tree they found during the walk. They had put words like prayer, religion, nature, third, tree, rainbow on the leaves which mostly came from the audience and their research. They later poured the dry leaves on the river wishing a safe world for leaves. Here the artist metaphorically addresses themselves as a leaf and those leaves also mean all sexually-diverse people like the artist.

Research assistant: Tanisha Chaity

Photography: Sunny Mahfuj



performance: prayer of a leaf

Dear society

A letter by a non-binary person

Dear Society is a performance based on a letter written by a non-binary boy. It was a part of a live online performance screening titled 'Spectrum of Choice' conducted by Bonhishikha and Mondro. It intends to leave the audience with an understanding of the spectrum and diversity of experiences that people in Bangladesh have. The spectrum of choices that they want to live for – in how they dress, how they move, how they feel for others, how they fall in love, how they manage friendships and relationships, how they manage shame and cope with harassment, how they enjoy sex, how they form bonds and families – how many ways people get live, with hope and courage and dignity. How as a society we can create space for all forms of identities and lives.

<https://youtu.be/o14tjEEULPQ>

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1DabchJt8NVyFV_bZW6z4DzN7t6sDICHt?usp=sharing



Images: Dear Society

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The Messengers

A tribute to slain blogger Oyasiqur Rahman Babu

‘The messengers’ is a performance based on the bravery and sufferings of Labannya, a transgender woman of Bangladesh who likes to introduce herself as a ‘Hijra’. She was praised and awarded for nabbing two terrorists in the killing of Oyasiqur Rhaman, who was a free thinker and blogger, in 2016. But threats and fears have forced her to leave the country.

The performance is a tribute to slain blogger Oyasiqur Rhaman that was held at the Shoparjito Shadhinota Chattar at Dhaka University in 2019.

<https://youtu.be/NZAtZdxNgSQ>

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1guc2GI9vFaoa1k8hslMG248ykcDjbJ5p?usp=sharing>



Images: The messengers

Who will own Xulhaz?

A tribute to slain LGBT rights activist Xulhaz Mannan

'Who will own Xulhaz?' is a performance upon the interview of Minhaz Mannan, elder brother of slain LGBT rights activist Xulhaz Mannan. In a question on the statement of Bangladesh Education Minister Dr Dipu Moni (who is a cousin of them) about the murder, Minhaz Bhai replied-Who will own Xulhaz in this social context of Bangladesh?

The title of the performance has been taken from the question directly, where I want to create an independent narrative by revisiting the essence, zir vitality of Xulhaz's character, which is close to the realities of sexually marginalised people in Bangladesh.

https://youtu.be/UPOqvd_7sUc

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1N9k5ai9ERYyxAxj8rB2H56Ltm8wV3Lkm?usp=sharing>



Images: Who will Own Xulhaz

My Dear Penis

A letter to my genitalia

'My Dear Penis' is a performance based on a letter to my genitalia that opposed my assigned sex at birth. It deals with the relationship between identity and politics, focusing on labels given by someone in society. It was presented at a queer fund-raising event organised by Oboyob Diversity Circle in 2019.

https://youtu.be/6fyh_b2t6yY

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ebqQK_oM6bl7CV-tikZj1xbyQcFedKyx?usp=sharing



Images of My Dear Penis

Curatorial Projects

Badal Dine

An performance event by Oboyob

Badal Dine is a experimental fundraising event organised by the Oboyob-Diversity Circle, one of the country's oldest platform for LGBTQIA+ community. Five individual performance artists and two recital activists took part in the initiative with their works on identity crisis, fantasy world, sexuality politics, child rape and experiences on social media.

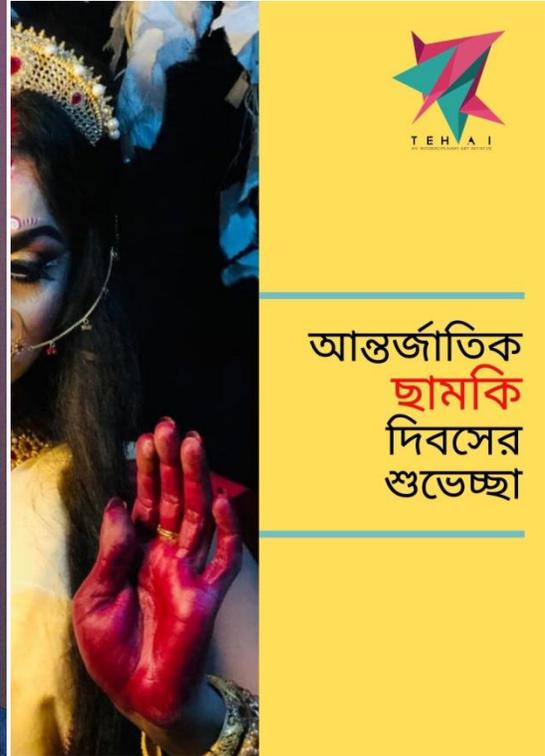
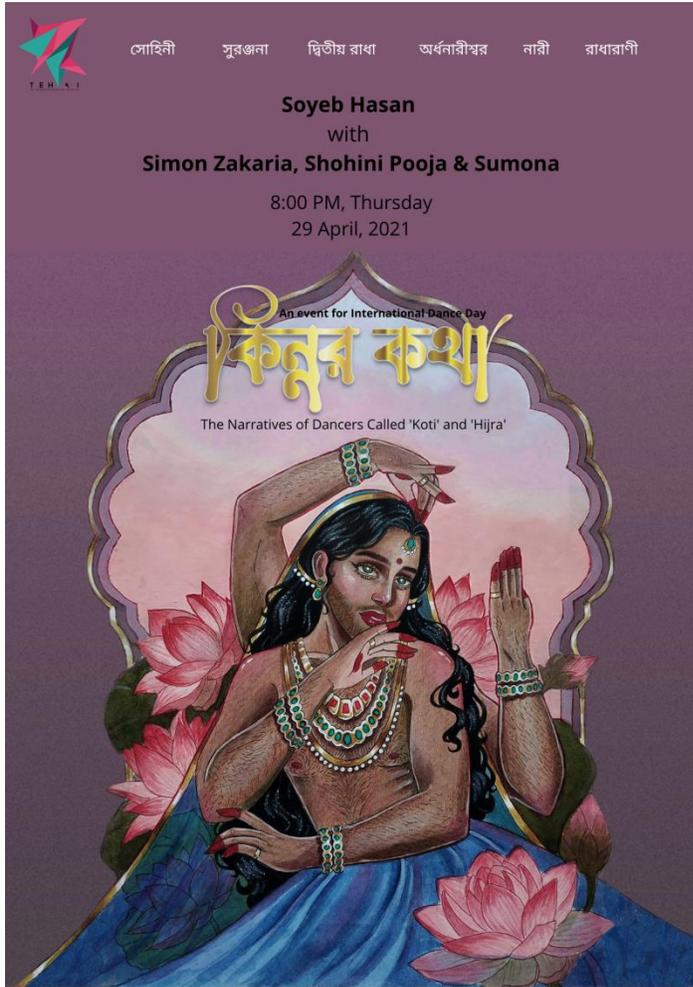


Images of Badal Dine

Kinnar Katha

The Narratives of Dancers Called 'Koti' and 'Dancers'

'কিন্নর কথা' is a research-based initiative based on the dancers called Koti, Hijra and other gender-diverse population of Bangladesh marking the International Dance Day every year. One of the main objectives of the project is searching the root of 'Hijra Chamki' (dance of hijras) and working for the recognition of the folk dance form in our country's mainstream cultural arena. As many as ten artists, writers and dancers took part in the initiative.

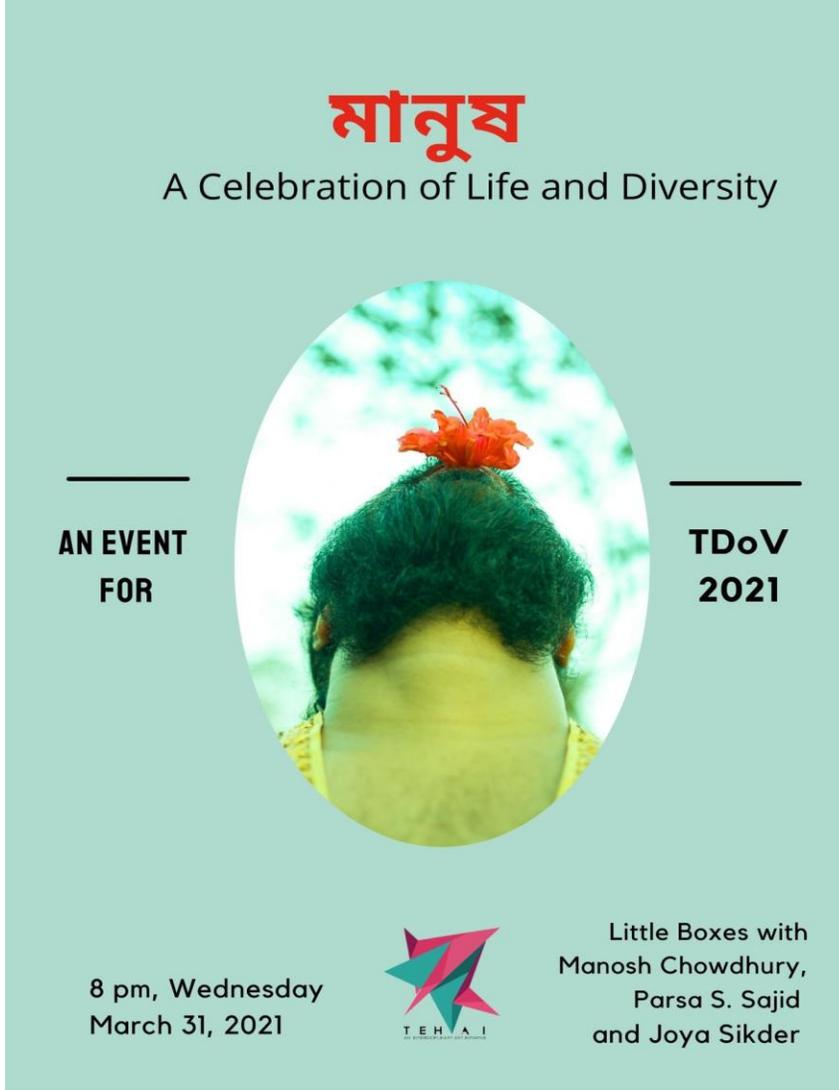


Posters of Kinnar Katha

Manush (মানুষ)

A Celebration of Life and Diversity

To celebrate the International Transgender Day of Visibility-2021, Tehai organised the event 'মানুষ: A Celebration of Life and Diversity'. Along with performances, recitation and reading, Akramul worked as a curator here with host Little Boxes who had conducted an online adda with Manosh Chowdhury, Parsa S Sajid and Joya Sikder during the COVID-19 pandemic.



The poster features a central oval image of a person with a vibrant green wig and a red flower on top, wearing a yellow garment. The background is a light teal color. Text is arranged around the central image and at the bottom.

মানুষ
A Celebration of Life and Diversity

AN EVENT
FOR

TDoV
2021

8 pm, Wednesday
March 31, 2021


TEHAI

Little Boxes with
Manosh Chowdhury,
Parsa S. Sajid
and Joya Sikder

Poster of Manush

Exhibition and Talk





Images taken during the exhibition 'Future Beyond the Self' and Artists Talk of 'Agni Mangal' at Kala Kendra in Dhaka

Photography

FRICITION

A performative photography series based on a poetry

সংঘাত

অগ্নি, একটি সংঘাত থেকে তার জন্ম

সংঘাত নাকি প্রেম?

এক টুকরো কাঠের সঙ্গে আর এক টুকরো কাঠের

নাকি এক মায়ের সঙ্গে অন্য এক মায়ের?

কিংবা এক নারীর সঙ্গে অন্য এক নারীর

Friction

Agni, the fire, borns from a friction

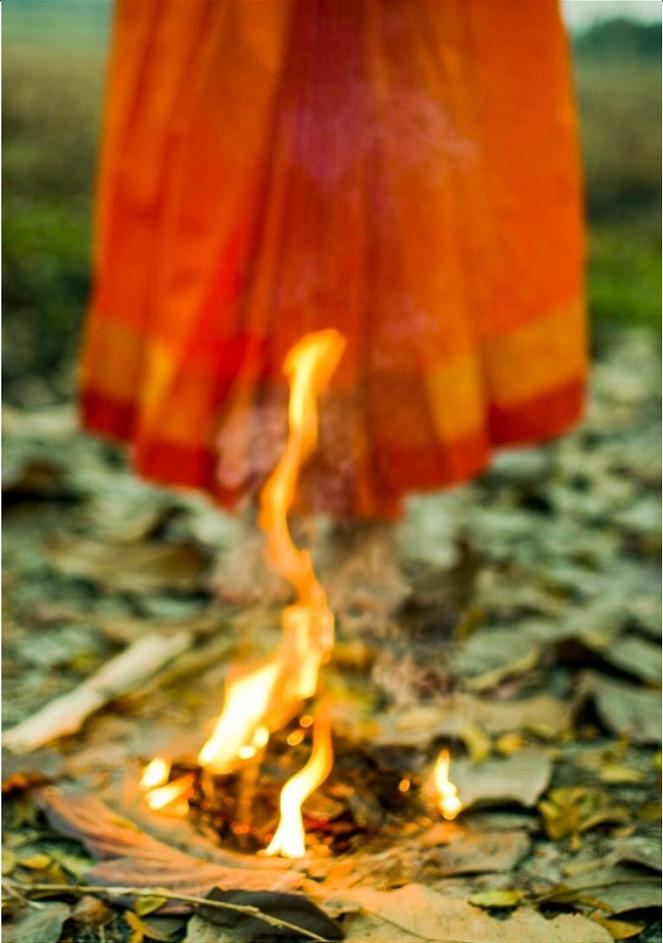
Friction or love?

Love between two sticks who are rubbed
together

or between two mothers?

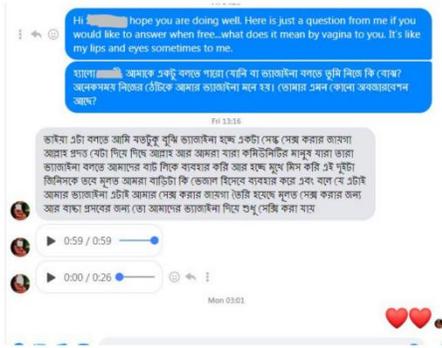
or a woman who loves another





Performance: Friction, Photography: Sunny Mahfuj

I HAVE A VAGINA BUT I AM NOT A WOMAN



ভ্যাজাইনা বলতে আমি যেটা বুঝি যে আল্লাহ প্রদত্ত একটা জায়গা, যে জায়গা দিয়ে মানুষের শরীরের বা যৌন খুদা বা ইচ্ছা যেটা মিটানো হয় বা যেখান থেকে একটা মানুষের জন্ম হয় সেই জায়গাটা বুঝি বা ভ্যাজাইনা বলি। আমাদের কমিউনিটির মানুষরা ভ্যাজাইনা বলতে বাটপিটাকেই বুঝি। এটাই তাঁর সেক্স এর জায়গা। তাঁর মনের আনন্দ বল আর চাহিদা বল মিটার রাস্তা বা জায়গাটাই হচ্ছে বাটপি। ওটাকেই ভ্যাজাইনা হিসেবে ব্যবহার করি। পাশাপাশি মুখতাকেও আমরা ভ্যাজাইনা বলি কারণ মুখের মাধ্যমেও কিন্তু মানুষের যৌন ক্ষুধা নিবারণ করা যায় বা মানুষের চাহিজায়পূরণ করা যায়।

বাটপি আর ভ্যাজাইনা সেম জিনিসই তবে পঠনপত কিছু পার্থক্য আছে। ভ্যাজাইনাতে সামনের দিকে কিছু জায়গা থাকে বা অইটা নিয়ে বাহা হয়। আমাদের যে ভ্যাজাইনাটা সেটা নিয়ে শুধু সেক্স করা যায়। ভিতরটা একই রকম, সেমেরেটা ভিতরে বেরকম আমাদেরটাও অইরকম, একই।







Performance: I have a vagina but I am not a woman, photography: Sunny Mahfuj

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https://www.newagebd.net/article/129967/agni-mangal-making-windows-on-walls?fbclid=IwAR3IRIXggwkohoiqdpXoIQ2K5EDozaUuNqogoTHEqrkD8d_zoTZ__UBNcRo

Agni Mangal: making windows on walls

Tanvir Alim | Published: 00:00, Feb 14,2021 | Updated: 14:38, Feb 14,2021

Agni Mongol was staged twice on 30 January at a studio in Lalbagh called Tehai. Tehai is an interdisciplinary art initiative which embodies a crossover between several disciplines. The deep essence of the dance performance illustrated the journey of a dancer and the achievements in this eventful journey for the dedication and hard work, writes Tanvir Alim

THE show Agni Mangal started with intense interaction with the audience at Lalbagh. The performer Rajani Raoja with a white costume wrapped the face with a white bandage and went to the audience sitting around the centre with a piece of colour paper asking them to write a word beyond man and woman.

In exchange, Rajani Raoja also knotted a rakhi in all of their hands to celebrate brotherhood and love. The audience could explore that the rakhi was containing different conversations full of judgment, hatred and bullying that he collected from dating apps. Later Rajani Raoja cut the costume with a pair of tiny scissors from and small pieces of coloured paper sprinkled out.

At this very moment, Rajani Raoja collected all the papers from the audience and burnt them in a lamp. The performer then wore the mask of Agni which is twice as big as his head with orange flames on top of the mask and started dancing. The transformation was thrilling as gathered from the responses of the audience.

Agni is the Hindu god of fire, son of Aditi and Kashyapa, and husband of Svaha. Agni was quite literally created from fire. In one poem in the Vedas, Agni's parents are two sticks whose friction creates fire — Angi. It is interesting to note that two sticks rubbing together were also a symbol of lesbian love. He had a relationship with the god Soma and one story in particular notes how Agni received Soma's semen into his mouth.

Rajani Raoja later explained that dating app was always a traumatic experience especially during the lockdown. According to Rajani Raoja, it always forces us to hide our real identity and present an image that is constructed as well accepted by the mainstream heterosexual society. Through the performance, Rajani Raoja brings the ultimate question to the audience about masculinity and its construction.

Agni Mongol was staged twice on 30 January at a studio in Lalbagh called Tehai. Tehai is an interdisciplinary art initiative which embodies a crossover between several disciplines like research, performance, film, theatre, dance, recitation and literature and offers an independent platform for artists.

The second part of the show which has no integrative congruence with the other part was 'The Tales of Sarees' which is a research-based dance performance on MSI's life and coexistence in the society, introduced the dancer MSI who came for a residency from Bheramara, Kushtia in this studio. MSI is a Chukri dancer from Bheramara and the dance performance was all about narrating the life of a Chukri dancer.

Chukri dance (literally, dance by young girls) featuring youths playing the roles of women, accompanies songs and has been in vogue in Bengal for a long time. This dance is performed on a canopied stage in a mango grove or an open field. It is directed by a master who leads a fairly large team of singers, musicians, and players. The musicians seat themselves on the sides of the stage and provide the music for the songs and dance. Others stay in the dressing room and wait for their cue. Young boys dressed as girls take part in this dance.

The deep essence of the dance performance illustrated the journey of a dancer and the achievements in this eventful journey for the dedication and hard work. During the residency, MSI composed several songs with the same tune of different folk performances however the text of these numbers was all recreated from looking back to the life. The dance performance ended with a crossed mindset of MSI where MSI's eighteen years old son asked the father not to wear sari anymore and MSI is in a fix. Will the eventful journey of MSI with sari end now after thirty years for the son?

During the discussion afterwards, it came out that Agni was narrated as bisexual in many of the texts but it did not do a proper judgment of defining bisexual people and their nature. In different narratives such as Bedh says Agni is white like the sun. The costume designer of the performance has chosen orange and pink as the colour of their costume. The props as well as the jewellery of the performance were collected from the surrounding areas of Old Dhaka which gave it a special flavour.

When MSI was in sixth grade, MSI was the best football player in Bheramara. MSI started dancing at the age of 12 when a master Akbar Ali came to the next village for their group performance and asked MSI to perform in the stage. It was a play called Kajal Rekha. People were scolding Akbar Ali as he has chosen a young boy like MSI to perform on stage. Later through dedication, MSI learnt the moves of this particular dance form by drawing blocks on the ground which was presented in a large piece of paper in that evening. MSI was dancing on that where the lyrics and many other calculations were roughly introduced.

At that time, MSI was asked to leave the house as no one in their family was into dance. MSI started living in the master's house and after a month, the family realised that MSI won't leave the dance-floor ever so they accepted MSI saying, 'You can perform in the group and dress as you like but there should not be any rumour around your performance ever.'

Now MSI is 50 years old and his group has ten members where the group is known as 'Ali Gayener Dol'. All the Chukri identified people in that locality have their own families and they perform female characters in different performances titled Poddopuran, Nosimon et cetera. MSI mentioned, 'My in-laws saw my performance before we got married and they have never complained.'

The coexistence of the Chukri identified people in their community might look very colourful from a distance but it might not be the same in their lived reality. If they have no call for the performance, they work as a construction worker or in the fields with the farmers. People in that locality strongly believe that the performance can heal them from snake bites and many other evil eyes surrounding them.

This dance performance is designed to understand the coexistence of dancers called Chukri by taking those narratives to the audiences. In the discussion after the performance, the audience present there brings out the western frameworks such as bisexuality, third gender, LGBT, rainbow et cetera which are mostly generated from their disrupt eurocentric approach to illustrate the context of the performances. However ambiguous identities without any name were existing in the subcontinent even before the colonial periods which can be perceived from their existence. Amara Das Wilhelm's book *Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex*, compiles years of extensive research of Sanskrit texts from medieval and ancient India and proves that homosexuals and the 'third gender' were not only in existence in Indian society back then, but that these identities were also widely accepted.

When asked about it, prominent researcher, dancer, cultural activist Lubna Marium said, 'I know that Agni Mangal addresses the issue of multiple identities within each of us and does not focus on sexual orientation, but it is obvious that the LGBT issue is the underlying meta-narrative. Also, the issue of chukri dance should not be conflated with the issue of identity. Chukri dance is a well-accepted genre of dancing. Though subliminally identity issues are part of that discourse too, we should not jeopardise the public acceptance of chukri dance by bringing that into the discussion.'

The performance Agni Mangal will take place again at the end of March and Tehai offers residency for artists to exchange views and experiences.

All together the two performances can be narrated as imagery to orientalise and reconcile colonial knowledge production however ambiguous identities are coexisting in our folklore from long before. This might be very difficult for the urban audience to internalise from such cultural practice against the existing identity politics and its discourse because of the political oppression that we inherently keep floating around. As an audience, the question that remains after the performance is the agency and ownership of the performer in front of the audience and the kind of epistemology that it tries to produce through participatory action research. Will that be able to make a vigilant deconstruction of our post-colonial hegemonic culture of hyper-masculinity?

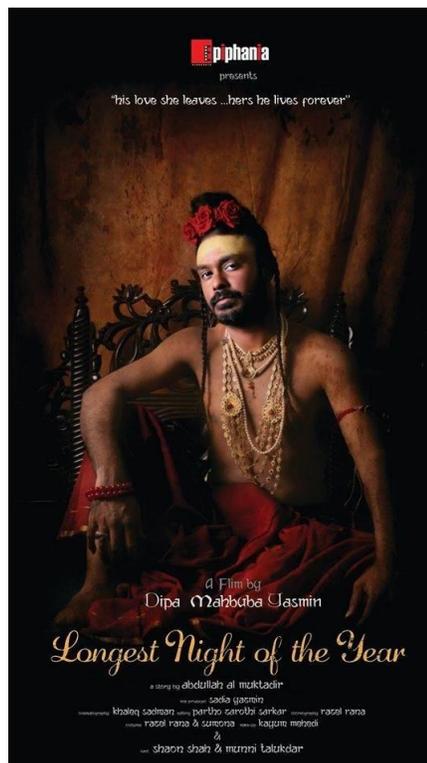
At the end of the interview, MSI said, 'In my village, they call me "artist MSI". My brothers are well educated but no one knows them. I am well known all around the district. Like all, I also like it when people call me an artist.'

Note: The author avoided using he and she in this text intentionally to keep the coherence with the gender ambiguity of the tradition. Due to security, the names of the original performers are not mentioned here.

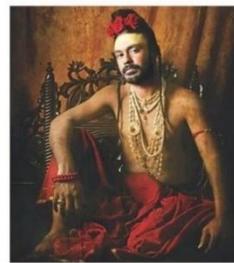
Tanvir Alim is a community organiser and archivist based in Dhaka.

MY WORKS WITH EP

It is a film screening program of Epiphania at Zahir Raihan Auditorium in Jahangirnagar University. As a programme coordinator, it is my one of the most important venture after my student life. It was an opening show of film named 'Longest Night of the Year', directed by Dipa Mahbuba Yasmin. I also design choreography and costumes for this digital video movie.



The Daily Star



The Longest Night of the Year screened at JU

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

On November 30, the film "The Longest Night of the Year" was screened at Jahangirnagar University. Written by Abdullah al Mukhtar and directed by Dipa Yasmin, the film is an alternative take on the myth of Radha and Krishna. Starring Shaon Shah and Munni Talukdar, the scenes breathtakingly capture the mythical elements of the narrative whilst breaking the barriers of social conventions. The film is produced and released by Epiphania. The film also marks the directorial debut of Dipa Yasmin, an artist and photographer who received training from Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka, said, "The story was originally written by my friend, and I never had plans to make a film," she said. "But I was so taken by

the mythological journey outlined so beautifully that I could not resist."

When asked about the inspiration behind the project, the artist said, "In the traditional myth, Radha waits for Krishna. In the film I wanted to reverse the gendered roles by having Krishna waiting for Radha. Another thing I sought to do was to deconstruct the conventional image of the "goddess" and the "witch" in the portrayal of Radha; she is not a conformingly beautiful goddess one would expect to see. I have decided to reverse the myth that has been written from the perspective of man, and undo the male gaze that has become the norm in our society."

Guests at the screening included artistic director of Shadhona Lubna Marium and faculty of Jahangirnagar University.

Planchette on 25 April

(Based on an open letter to Mahbub Tonoy)

Tribute to Mahbub Tonoy, who was hacked to death with another LGBT rights activist Xulhaz Mannan on Apr 25 in 2016 by the extremists in Bangladesh. He was a mustachioed man who loved to wear sharee and opposed to follow the conventional gender expression.

Dedicating Tonoy on his first death anniversary, this performance is directed and filmed by Dipa Mahbuba Yasmin as an improvisational cine play at the Shadhona Cultural Centre in Dhaka. It is performed by Akramul Momen, who is a queer performance artist.

This is more than a performance as a voice for the support of the LGBTQIA+ people of Bangladesh and deals with the social taboo on identities

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GREAT WAR ENDS
works by:
Alice Sielle
Ruhul Abdin
James George Diddams
James McNeil Whistler
Dame Elizabeth Frink
Keith Vaughan
Duncan Grant
Cornelius McCarthy
NAKED:WAR
SPECIAL artist and activist Q&A
Host: Ash Kotak
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BANGLADESH LGBTQ : WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Thurs 7th June : 6:30 pm for a 7pm start

"Loveletter to a late lover, who wanted to step out of a comfortable closet"
Planchette
on 25 April
Based on the open letter to Mahbub Rabba Tonoy from 7.4
An Improvisational CinePlay by
Dipa Mahbuba Yasmin

UK PREMIERE OF SHORT FILM: PLANCHETTE ON 25 APRIL

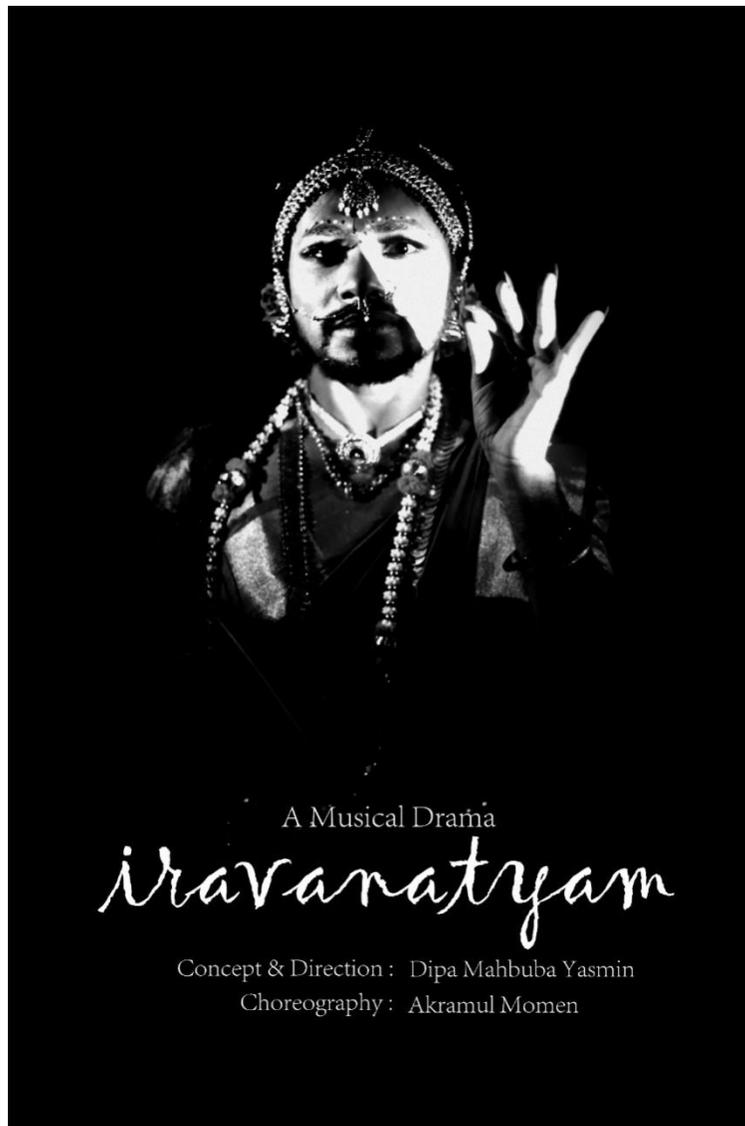
An Improvisational CinePlay by
Dipa Mahbuba Yasmin, which will
be followed by a Q&A hosted by Ash
Kotak and an LGBTQ activist from
Bangladesh along with Ruhul Abdin
To RSVP please email:
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Iravanattyam

A musical dance drama

"Naagraaj Iravan is a deprived character of Mahabharata. To satisfy the goddess this Hermaphrodite son of God Arjuna and Ulupi was sacrificed in Kurushkhetra. Stunned in morn, Lord Krishna was crying, in disguise of Mohini."

'Iravanatyam' is e a musical dance drama written and directed by Dipa Mahbuba Yasmin. Akramul plays the role of Iravan and choreographs the drama. The story of the drama is based on Indian mythology but the representation or the motive of the representation is deeply rooted in socio-cultural reality. Iravan is a an essentially transsexual character from Mahabharata, but in Mahabharata the treatment of the character is symbolic which mutes the character's inner intimate voice. Our representation unveils the character's essence , zir vitality. The play thus deals with the social taboo on identity.



Brave heart dancer of our time

Divinity has no gender circumscription. With this spirit ecstatic dancer, with a kin interest in arts journalism Akramul Momen personates the character of Iravan who has been highlighted as hermaphrodite god in South Indian version of Mahabharata in the dance drama Iravanatyam. **Shoeb Karim** talks to dancer Akramul Momen and writes about his unique journey



Dancer and arts journalist Akramul Momen broke all stereotypes and braved the path against the wind. In a society where dancing is considered not so masculine profession for a man, he dedicated his youth to become a classical dancer. He has been practicing Indian classical dance throughout his student life. He also performs in theatres.

Akramul graduated from Jahangirnagar University in Bengali literature. Interweaving his interest in art and literature he chose dance form to express himself. During his studies in university, he got extensive training in many traditional dance forms including his eight year long training in bharatnatyam. He was trained under the guidance of many trainers from Bangladesh and India. After all this years of learning, he is now performing as an artist with Shadhona Cultural Centre. Personally, he is experimenting with classical bharatnatyam to give it a contemporary form.

Akramul has performed in the Classical Dance Festival organised by Bengal Foundation in 2016. He has also developed

keen interest in choreography and working as a choreographer in multiple films. From the beginning of 2017, he has been performing the dance drama Iravanatyam. Though he played many roles, for him the most challenging role that he plays so far in his career is the story of Iravan.

When asked about the play, what is so particularly unique and inspiring about the play? Akramul replied, 'The story of Iravanatyam is inspired by Indian myth but the play that emerged from it is an independent narrative. It is primarily strung in area of revisiting mythology and re-interpreting our past. Sexual freedom of transgender recognised as a taboo in our society. Iravan is an essentially transsexual character from Mahabharata, but in Mahabharata the treatment of the character is symbolic which mutes the character's inner intimate voice. Our representation unveils the character's essence, zir vitality. The theater thus deals with the social taboo on gender identity.'

Iravan is the representative of a part of the society that has similar identity crisis



Iravanatyam is a struggle of traversing identity crisis, so he chooses his own village to overcome all the fear and confusion.

In April 25, they were invited by a foreign embassy to perform their second show of this dance drama. The dance drama underpins the artist's long journey into the arena of dance and the present state of a hermaphrodite life.

He thinks the love of the audience and their inspiration is the only thing that energises him. The drama will be staged in the middle of this year again. There is also an effort to bring it to the movie screen besides this theatrical representation. They made Iravanatyam to reach the unknown story of a hermaphrodite god in the international level.

Along with the exhibition, 'Iravan: At 21st Century', on April 25, with the same makeup and get up 'Plan chat on 25 April' was filmed under the direction of Dipa Mahbuba Yasmin. In this film, in memory of a friend killed last year on the same day, a letter written by the friend's beloved was read in a plan chat. Akramul says, 'That letter was too important for us. So incidentally after coming across the latter the director decided to film it.'

Akramul works for many organisations like Nrityanchal Performing Art's Academy, Mumtaz Academy of Dance, Nritynandan. In the last year, he was appraised for his first solo performance in memory of the journalist couple Shagor-Runi at Drik Gallery.

At present he is working as a performing artist. Dance, which was once a hobby for him is now a commitment. He wants to be professional dancer. He thinks no idea can be materialised within a short span of time. On the other hand working for the hermaphrodite people is not so easy in our present culture but it's an artist's duty to work for the deprived and the oppressed of the society.

Divinity has no gender circumscription. With this spirit ecstatic dancer, with a kin interest in arts journalism Akramul Momen personates the character of Iravan and pledge to take the story to all corners of the country. *

Shoeb Karim is a student of Chittagong University.



as he himself going through. Today, Iravan becomes an idea, a concept beyond the myth, beyond religion.

According to Tamil edition of Mahabharata, Iravan was the son of Arjun and Ulupi. The Mahabharata portrays Iravan as dying a heroic death in the 18-day Kurukshetra War. However, the South Indian version has a supplementary tradition of honouring Iravan's self-sacrifice to the goddess Kali to ensure her favour and the victory of the Pandavas in the war. The Kuttantavar cult focuses on one of the three boons granted to Iravan by the god Krishna in honour of his self-sacrifice. Iravan requested that he be married before his death. Krishna satisfied this boon in disguise of Mohini. This marriage could be possible on condition of sacrificing zer life. It has been considered that Iravan decides to sacrifice zer life, absorbed in love of Krishna.

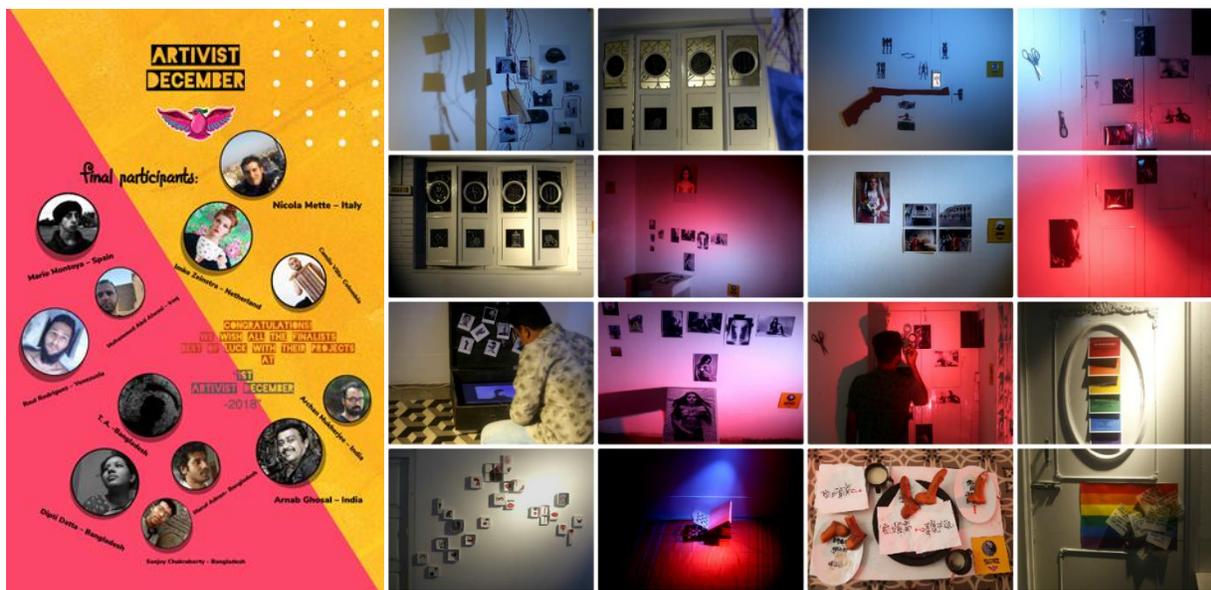
This dance drama was first performed in countryside in Narsingdi, in that vary place where Akramul was born. Akram thinks

Artist December -2018

To mark the International Human Rights Day which is celebrated annually across the world on 10 December every year, Akramul works as a coordinator to arrange a month-long exhibition titled 'Artist December-2018'. Eight international artists and four renowned artists from Bangladesh were selected in the exhibition organised by Epiphania Visuals. The first phrase of the exhibition began on 1 December and continued until 10 December from 3pm-10pm every day.

To celebrate the Human Rights Day, we have invited artists who intended to work on religious fundamentalism, social and political crisis, marginal sexuality or gender discrimination, freedom of expression, human rights and development based issues. We have received great responses from various artists and the selected artists were:

Arnab Ghosal – India, Archan Mukherjee – India, Camilo Villa- Colombia, Dipti Datta – Bangladesh, Imke Zeinstra – Netherland, Mohammed Abd Alwasi – Iraq, Mario Montoya – Spain, Maruf Adnan- Bangladesh, Nicola Mette – Italy, Raul Rodriguez – Venezuela, Sanjoy Chakraborty – Bangladesh, T.A. –Bangladesh



Images of 'Artist December-2018'