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# Panning from the Past to the Present: The Climate, Context and Concept of Bangladeshi National Cinema

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## Introduction

Decades-long negligence found this region totally lacking in primary filming equipment, film production know how 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 potential. (Alamgir Kabir, 'Bangladesh Cinema: A Critical Note', 1989: 47)

An enthusiastic audience has always played a key role and been a legitimate part of the Bangladeshi film industry. Cinema, as popular art, is reflected in various portions of public culture (Nasreen and Haq 2008: 23) and is a major source of entertainment in Bangladesh. People here celebrate their festivals and happy moments by watching films in cinema theatres accompanied by their family and friends. Celebrity gossip magazines, filled with gossip and stories of film celebrities, are a source of

entertainment for them. Shows featuring movie songs, such as *Chayachondo* on television and *Ganer Dali* on the radio are still the most popular programmes for them. They are accustomed to seeing the flamboyant colours and lines of rickshaw paintings<sup>1</sup> featuring faces of popular movie stars. Movie songs played on tape recorders are typical for tea-stalls, restaurants and public transport ranging from large cities to small villages – a short while ago even these scenarios were characteristic of the Bangladeshis and their cultural practices. During the 1960s and 1970s, cinema was a major source of entertainment for the urban middle classes alone. More recently, the reputation of Bangladeshi cinema has dropped off, deterring highbrow and middle-class audiences.

Throughout this article, the historical and regional context of Bangladeshi cinema will be outlined, exploring its different integral aspects, such as production value, style, cultural content, representation, nation state policies, distribution and exhibition practices, transnational connections and other industrial factors. At the same time, this paper examines the role of film in the formation of Bangladeshi national culture and the analytical approaches and complexities revolving around the concept of national cinema in Bangladesh. The concept of ‘national cinema’ has been commonly linked to the sociological thinking of the nation and its national identity, and it is also rooted within the geopolitical and cultural boundaries of a nation state. Again the idea of national cinema is not perennial like the idea of nation. National cinema has been a negotiated and changing concept, shaped by both the inward contemporary cultural specificity of a nation state and the outward cultural influence gained through its transnational encounter. Therefore, in order to study the concept of national cinema of Bangladesh in this paper, I address and discuss a series of issues: the concept of Bangladeshi nationalism, its relation to Bangladeshi film culture, a brief context and the conditions of contemporary film industry, the transnational affects and effects of rapidly changing mediascape on Bangladeshi film culture.

Regardless of the technological advancements of recent years, film remains the most popular form of entertainment in Bangladesh being attended by 80% of the country’s population. Cinema critics and cultural elites are inclined to categorize the existing cinemagoers as ‘lumpens’ (Mokammel 1999: 30) because of their poor and uneducated status. This is the audience, however, which keeps the Bangladeshi film industry afloat. Seeing the popular acceptance of Bangladeshi cinema, Alamgir Kabir states: ‘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’ (Kabir 1979: 92). Time will test the veracity of this statement; what can be said for certain at this point is that film played a foundational role in crystallising Bangladeshi national identity. Whereas, in the developed world, the flow of different forms of modern media like internet and television are escalating rapidly, a developing country like Bangladesh, with a low

literacy rate, is unable to offer access to those media to all its citizens and thus the popularity and influence of an audio-visual medium like film is far more persuasive than any other electronic media. Although the

popularity of television is gathering strength, and tends to displace the theatrical cinema circuit with its easier availability, in point of fact the television industry is also dependent on cinema. Cinema and cinema-related shows take up huge proportions of air time, and television channels are also coming forward to produce full length films, launched through mainstream cinemas. Besides India, Bangladesh is the leading country in the Asian Subcontinent which produces the highest numbers of films, on average generating 80 to 100 films annually in the 1990s (Masud 2011: n.p) and reaching about 102 in 2005 (Hayat 2006: 13). During the 1990s, daily more than one million people watched films in about 1,500 cinema theatres of Bangladesh (Hayat 2006.a : n.p).

The origin of Bangladeshi cinema predates the formation of Bangladesh as a nation state. The history of cinema projection there has reached more than 100 years and began in 1898. The history of silent films traversed almost 43 years and was marked by the film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) directed by Hiralal Sen. Sound film production in Bengali language has lasted for 58 years, having started in 1956 with the film *Mukh O Mukhosh* (Face and Mask) by Abdul Jabbar Khan. Incorporating shooting, editing, sound dubbing, lab and printing facilities, the professional film studio and laboratory East Pakistan Film Development Corporation (EPFDC) was established in 1958 with the assistance of the government just after one year following the sound film production. With support from the EPFDC, the films began to be released on a regular basis from 1959. Many notable events took place since then in the cinematic landscape of Bangladesh which outlined and boosted the aesthetic and industrial practices of Bangladeshi cinema. In 1963 the inauguration of the film society took place and in 1969 the cine-club movement was initiated. The great event of the Liberation War of 1971 created a milieu for the Bangladeshi film industry to become a cultural and industrial unit of an independent nation state. The National Film Award was first introduced in 1975. Allocation of grants in film making was initiated in 1976. The foundation of the film archive in 1978, the beginning of the alternative film movement in 1980s, the launch of the international film festival in 1981 with support from the government and the international short film festival in 1988 under the banner of the Bangladesh Short Film Forum, the triumph of *Matir Moina* (2002) during the International Critics' (FIPRESCI) award in 'Director's Fortnight' section at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival – these are among those key events which can be regarded as accomplishments of the Bangladeshi cinema. However, many believe that even with those significant accomplishments, a qualitative change did not ensue in the industrial and aesthetic practices of Bangladeshi cinema. As the aim of this paper is to outline the brief contextual background of the Bangladeshi film industry and its film culture, the above context has been given as a preface to comprehend the climate of the industry.

### **Frame within frame: Towards the 'national identity' of the Bangladeshis and theorizing 'national cinema'**

It is hard to define the idea of a 'nation'. It may not have a territorial boundary in the same manner as a state; it might



instead be suggested by the common cultural markers of identity, history and language. Benedict Anderson interprets nation as an imagined entity in his classical study of nationalism. Members of a nation feel connected to the same social space and carry a common 'image of their communion' without knowing each other (1991: 6). Homi Bhabha refers to nation as a 'continuous narrative' that constructs national progress and a 'system of cultural signification' by representing social life rather than social polity (Bhabha 1990: 1-2). Conversely, a state has a territorial boundary, and is governed by a set of legal and political organizations, rather than by the community which constitutes a nation. Nation and state, although having distinct features, are congruous and cannot be analyzed separately. Susan Hayward says, 'the state is founded in the nation and the nation is constituted as the state' and she also highlights the vital role of nationalist discourses around culture in creating a link between state and nation (2000: 89-90). In Eric Hobsbawm's words, 'nationalism comes before nations. Nations do not make states and nationalism but the other way around' (1992: 10). So nationalism is a distinct phenomenon or an identity through which a socio-cultural community as a collective group of individuals demonstrates the aspiration to form or maintain a state. Hobsbawm's statement is a useful explanation of the way that Bengali nationalism emerged before the formation of the nation state of Bangladesh. The profound strength and collective consciousness of Bengali nationalism that emerged among the Bengali nation of East Bengal/ East Pakistan, led them to fight for autonomy and for a sovereign nation state. Although language, race, ethnicity, religion, shared culture and common historical experience are the predisposing forces in the propagation of nationalism, in the case of the identity construction of the Bengali Muslim in East Bengal, 'language' and 'religion' were the core factors that shaped the collective identity, followed by factors that came to prominence individually or blended together, on various occasions over the century.

The emergence of Bangladesh drew strength from the secular consciousness of Bengali nationalism, based partly on linguistic identity and partly on the economic deprivation of East Bengal by West Pakistan. So, the influence of nationalism that drove the masses of East Bengal regardless of their religion, class, caste, creed and gender, to fight for the freedom and for a land during the Liberation War, was strongly based on secularism, where Bengali language and cultural identity represented its nucleus. Many conflicting and complex questions arose later on relating to national identity about whether Bangladeshis are Bengali first and Muslims second or Muslim first then Bengali second. How should their national identities distinguish them from the Bengali speaking community of West Bengal in India? How would the nation state accommodate the minorities from different indigenous ethnicities who do not speak Bengali within the wholeness of Bengali nationalism?

In Europe, the question of national identity and nationalism was able to replace religion from the seventeenth century onward. Anderson argues, 'in Western Europe the eighteenth century marks not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the

dusk of religious modes of thought' (1991: 11). In South Asia, however, religion has played a dominant and central role as the marker of national identity. Particularly in 1947 the emergence of the new nation states of India and Pakistan was based on their religious majority: India with Hindu majority and Pakistan with the Muslim majority. Contiguous areas became two different nation states that in some ways were actively influenced by the British, although these two countries shared common cultural patterns for centuries before the partition. East Bengal (the present Bangladesh), the deltaic districts of the province of Bengal and the eastern section of the Indian subcontinent were relatively homogenous in cultural, linguistic and ethnic terms and became part of the new nation of Pakistan on the basis of its Muslim majority population. Apart from their shared religion, these two parts west and east were separated by several hundred miles of India, and in fact had little in common. Furthermore, the practices of Islam in West Pakistan and East Pakistan (then East Bengal) were different in many aspects.

The inhabitants of East Bengal, who migrated from south-east Asia, embraced Islam during the 13th century, and started to instigate their specific 'agrarian practices' and 'animist belief system' into this area (Kabeer 2011: 140). Since most of the inhabitants of this region initially belonged to the lower Hindu castes, they experienced social deprivation, and converted to Islam as a religion which propounded a philosophy of greater social equality. For many years the influence of Buddhism, Vaishnavism and finally Islam, the three liberal streams of three major religions, shaped the local culture and tradition of East Bengal and made it more syncretistic and flexible (Sobhan 1994: 65-66). Consequently, during the eighteenth and nineteenth century the beliefs and cultural practices of Bengali Muslims were somewhat similar to their Hindu counterparts. There was another group of Muslims, an elite in the Bengali society who called themselves *Ashraf*. The Urdu- and Persian-speaking *Ashrafs*' ancestry came from outside of Bengal and there was a widening gap between this elite group and the rural masses of East Bengal on the basis of their language and cultural practices. Jadunath Sarkar, a renowned Bengal historian stated that, 'the Muslim Masses, knowing only Bengali, heard the poems and stories in Bengali, witnessed performances based on these at Hindu festivals, patronised by Hindu Zamindars. Thus, the mental background of the Bengali Muslim was more Hindu than Muslim' (cited in Khan 1985: 838). So having the distinct cultural practices and secular beliefs Bengali Muslim could not feel integrated with Pakistani nationalism after the emergence of Pakistan in 1947 that was based on Muslim nationalist identity as being a part of the Islamic Republic state. Equally, they were not even considered as similar to the Bengali speaking residents of West Bengal during the 19th century when Bengal was a region belonging entirely to the Bengali speaking masses, consisting of East and West Bengal.

West Bengal, the western part of Bengal incorporating a Brahmanical Hinduism and hierarchy, formed an English educated middle class, which actively participated in the administrative sector of Bengal during the British colonial period. Kolkata became the colonial capital from the late eighteenth century to 1911. The newly emerged

middle class Hindus was able to come forward and developed a 'natural momentum of growth' with their close collaborations and contacts with the British rulers throughout the century (Kabir 1979: 12). There were distinctive disparities between the two Bengals. Muslims were usually isolated from the political and cultural life of colonial Bengal, and faced a low status derived from the defeat of Muslim rulers in the battle of Palassey by the East India Company of Britain in 1757. In most sectors, like education, arts, trade or government services, Bengali Muslims were less developed than the Bengali Hindus. However, the minority role of Muslims intensified to the desire for a Muslim middle class, and ultimately for a separate Muslim nation later on in the nineteenth century. During this time the *Farazi movement* (an Islamic reformist movement) and Muslim League leaders both supported the partition of Bengal in 1905. Bengali Muslims quickly reaped the benefits of the partition and many significant developments occurred during this time. Although in 1911 Bengal was reunited again, the profound aspiration to a separate Muslim state was an underlying concept of their identity in British India. This longing led them to the union with the new nation state of Pakistan in 1947, as it was a Muslim state, in spite of their differences in cultural practices, and distance in geographical location.

However, this enthusiasm of Muslimness was short lived. The economic and cultural disparities between West and East Pakistan became quickly visible after the independence of Pakistan, and crisis point was reached when Urdu was declared as the national language. In response to the announcement, widespread agitation broke out among the masses, particularly among students. This was followed by the Language movement in 1952, resulting in the death of several students from East Pakistan. Finally, the government was compelled to declare both Urdu and Bengali as the joint national language of Pakistan. The Language movement mobilized and boosted a new spirit and imagined identity of Bengali nationalism that was rooted more in the secular ideology and cultural distinctiveness of Bengaliness beyond the religious and communal boundaries. This was even manifested in the cinematic landscape of Bangladesh. The pre-Liberation films indirectly drew a nation building agenda or a cultural ideological space to create a Bengaliness that opposed the domination of Pakistan. For instance, *Jibon Thekey Neya* (*Glimpses of life*, 1970), a film by Zahir Raihan, responded to that crucial time of repression by symbolizing the national experiences, the exploitation of Bengalis under the military dictatorship of Ayub Khan. Many critics consequently consider this film to be the supreme expression of Bengali nationalism.

This new consciousness of Bengali nationalism and cultural resurgence among the masses of East Pakistan led them to move forward towards freedom and independence which was finally achieved in 1971 as a result of a bloody war against West Pakistan. So, the inspiration of the Liberation War was derived from the secular connotation of Bengali nationalism which was even evident in the war time slogans like *Joy Bangla* (Victory to Bengal) indicating the freedom of Bengal as a supreme aspiration without employing any religious inspiration or connotations. This slogan appeared repeatedly in many



war films as a vigorous accent and connotation of Bengali nationalism.

After the independence, Bangladesh incorporated nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism as the basic state principles of the Constitution, in which the concept of 'Bengali nationalism' was clearly defined in article 9: 'The unity and solidarity of the Bengali nation, which deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of independence, shall be the basis of Bengali nationalism'<sup>2</sup>. Later on, General Ziaur Rahman, as the president of Bangladesh from 1976 to 1981, initiated the process of Islamization by removing all secular principles through the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution, forming Bangladeshi Nationalism, thus replacing Bengali nationalism during his regime. In recent years, the Awami League-led alliance as a pro-Liberation ruling coalition government brought constitutional change in the Fifteenth Amendment Act, 2011. The Constitution re-enshrined those fundamental principles of democracy, socialism, secularism and nationalism, and also incorporates the concept of identity that the People of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangalees (Bengalis) as a nation, while the citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangladeshis. This state initiative of establishing nationalism as 'Bengalis' was again criticized by different political leaders and members of civil society as they claim that it may hinder cultural harmony and diversity, ignoring and excluding different ethnic groups from the state declared 'Bangalee' (Bengali) national identity. It should be noted that this secular term 'Bengali' was always assumed as the hidden and imagined strength beneath the notion of the identity of Bangladeshis, whether it is assured or fixed by the state or not. This assertion is powerfully evidenced by the survey of the BBC Bengali Service conducted in 2004: they canvassed their twelve million listeners in Bangladesh and in eastern India, to determine the greatest Bengali of all time (Mustafa 2004: n.p). The result of the survey shows the account of Bangladeshis identity as interchangeable with the term 'Bengali' by placing Shekh Mujibur Rahman, who is regarded as the architect of independent Bangladesh and the first prime minister of the Bangladeshi nation state as the greatest Bengali of all time. Rahman easily beat Nobel prize winning poet and playwright Rabindranath Tagore, the author of the national anthems of Bangladesh and India, placing him into second place. Although in British India the term 'Bengali' referred to the identity of Hindus of West Bengal, the term is now increasingly becoming a marker of identity of Bangladeshis, cross-pollinating with their Muslim identity.

A national identity is not a fixed: rather it is constructed and selective. As Andrew Higson argues, 'national identity is by no means a fixed phenomenon, but constantly shifting, constantly in the process of becoming' (1995: 04), Bangladesh also has gone through many changes in the quest of its national identity that also involves a selective appropriation of its ideology, tradition, history and political practices in different times. In the pre

and post-independence era, religion and language both appeared as the most important elements in the compound identity formation of Bangladeshis where 'religio-linguistic' and 'ethno-linguistic' identity emerged. Bangladeshi cinema as a cultural



could not overlook the complex relation of these two identities, which is also evident in Higson's views as he writes that national cinema incorporating a more '*inward-looking*' vision constitutes 'its relationship to an already existing national political, economic and cultural identity' (1989: 42). For example, the 'Code for Censorship' of films in Bangladesh as an institutional treaty, framed by the Bangladesh Film Censor Board, placed the identity issue as the first consideration among its 8 main instructions under which a film may not be released. The first regulation states that a film will be regarded as unsuitable for public exhibition if it 'contain[s] anything opposed to the independence of Bangladesh and its integrity, sovereignty, law and order, value systems, social customs and traditions and the country's defence and security forces' (Hayat 2006: n.p).

Higson quotes James Donald's statement that, 'a nation does not express itself through culture: it is culture that produces the nation' (1995: 06). Bangladeshi film as a form of cultural expression of Bangladeshi nation state is also directly or indirectly bound to negotiate with the process of constructing a collective consciousness of nation and nationhood, even by the imposed regulation and ideology of the institution. It would be simplistic to assume that because these regulations exist they are followed outright, either by film-makers or by the Film Censor Board itself, especially given claims that the Board is a 'body created to serve the values of the ruling class' (Mokammel 1999: 31). Under its bureaucratic corridor of power good films often face obstacles to their release; in addition, not all films made in Bangladesh contribute to the construction of Bangladeshi nation by upholding and enacting aspirations and values relating to the collective consciousness and identity issues. In searching for a national cinema, degrees of nationalist imagery, identity issues or discussion around the creation of nation are not the sole considerations; rather, cinema deals with 'a series of sets of relations between national film texts, national and international film industries, and the films' and industries' socio-political and cultural contexts' (Hayward 2000: 92). So, for conceptualizing the national cinema of Bangladesh, it is not only subjected to the scrutiny of the representation of the national identity, but it also needs to draw upon the issues of consumption patterns, the influence and impact of film on national culture, national political spaces and policies, interaction of cinema with different modes of media and modernity, and the overall shape, or state, of the film industry.

### **A high angle shot: The contemporary Bangladeshi film industry and national film culture**

The Bangladeshi film industry is known as Dhallywood, based in Dhaka and influenced by the two words 'Dhaka' and 'Hollywood'. The expression 'Dhallywood' may suggest an understanding of the inevitable dominance of Hollywood over Bangladeshi films, as

Hollywood films 'flood the world's screens' (Chaudhuri 2005: 03) and dominate the world's film markets from the early era since 1919 (Crofts 2000: 06). In the same vein, it is quite predictable for Bangladeshi films to form a hybrid mode under the great

flow of the Hollywood wave as films from Hollywood have been permitted to be exhibited in the cinema theatres of Bangladesh and also in the state owned television channel since the independence of Bangladesh. Higson says, 'Hollywood [...] has [...], of course, for many years been an integral and naturalised part of the national culture, of the popular imagination, of most countries in which cinema is an established entertainment form' (1989: 39). In the case of Bangladeshi cinema, the industrial mode in some ways follows the standardized commercial interests of Hollywood in terms of the film's duration, censorship procedure, studio based film production and the practices of traditional film exhibition. The cultural mode of the production, however, sustains a local character 'almost ignoring the Hollywood film industry' (Raju 2006: 123). Actually in Bangladesh where literacy rate is low Hollywood films, which are in English, never developed much in the way of mass appeal. Artistically, if not structurally, therefore, Bangladeshi cinema has been able to step out of the Hollywood model. It remains to ask, what kind of cultural model these films enact: are they equipped with such qualities to project culturally specific imaginaries or unique features that hold and display the national character? Or, do they accommodate and maintain a visual space for the Bangladeshis which they can identify as their shared belonging or as a legitimate expression of their national identity? Here it is worth recalling that in the face of globalization, the idea of cinema as displaying national distinctiveness is becoming 'decentred and assimilated within larger transnational system of entertainment' (Kinder in Crofts 2000: 9). Conversely, it should be noticed that cinema can seldom go beyond its national identity when it is produced in national languages focusing on national surroundings, consciousness, history, heritage, literatures, culture and folklores. In this respect, Bangladeshi cinema has to have a generic or stylistic narrative composition and a specific infrastructure of production, distribution and exhibition as it has always been targeted to a local audience, solely producing in Bengali language.

Stephen Crofts labels Bangladeshi popular cinema as 'other entertainment cinema' that includes genres of melodrama, comedy and action thriller, and is ultimately an imitation of Indian cinemas (Crofts 2000: 06). The industrial studio film practice of Bangladesh is noted by Catherine Masud as a 'crude song-dance-fight formula copied from the Bollywood model' which even fails to represent authentically Indian culture (Masud 2004: n.p). Similar thought is evident in Tanvir Mokammel's opinion. He characterizes Bangladeshi popular cinema as a 'poor man's copy of the Bollywood masala films', that follows the formula by offering a mixture of different elements in a single film such as song, dance, action, melodrama, romance, fantasy and comedy (1999: 29). Although the ban on exhibiting or releasing Indian cinema has been carried out by the state since 1965, during the India-Pakistan border conflict, and has continued even in post-independence era until 2011, the dominance of Bollywood over Bangladeshi films is indisputable. Most Dhallywood films copy the screenplays, dialogues, title, music and even lyrics of Indian films, leading Kabir to categorize them as 'plagiarised films' (Kabir 1979: 61-62). Consequently, Bangladeshi

popular cinemas were influenced by the ‘extreme-action films’ as a major genre after the 1980s when the screen totally refused to accommodate *mishtee premer golpo* (romantic family and social drama), the most popular film genre of Bangladesh in the 1970s. During the 1960s and 1970s, most films portrayed middle class life and values by constructing narratives about love and hate, and conflict between different social classes. By exploiting cheap and common sentiments and emotional values, these films drew stereotypical stories and characters, who stood clearly either side of a great gulf between good and evil. In most of the cases the climaxes and conflicts were more or less similar. Love affairs between two classes like rich and poor or two localities such as urban and rural usually boosted the main tension of those films, and in the end, justice would prevail and the bad guys were punished. The idea was that a middle-class audience would find assonance with their own stories in these familiar narratives.

This period of middle-class audience domination came to an end with the increase of violence and introduction of erotic content in the 1980s, creeping in alongside absurd, Bollywood-inspired plot-lines. As this era saw the stylistic portrayal of the ‘angry young man’ Amitabh Bachchan on the Bollywood screen where terrorism, violence, mafia actions became central elements, that manner of story-telling also entered abruptly in Bangladeshi cinema with all its rage and violent action. In addition to violent sensationalism, Dhallywood began to incorporate uncensored, sexually explicit scenes and ‘vulgar’ clips, known as ‘cut-pieces’ (Raju 2011: n.p). In order to handle competition with Bollywood, Dhallywood initiated this formula, the insertion of cut-pieces, to attract the working class audience, mostly from the villages.

Many consider Bollywood films as an incurable threat to the Bangladeshi film industry that has not only affected the films’ standards or artistic content but also attracted middle class viewers with their huge circulation in many non theatrical means of viewing. These resources included home entertainment systems such as VCR, VCD, DVD players, feeds from internet and satellite cable networks etc, keeping those viewers from going to cinema theatres to watch Bangladeshi films. As the business of pirated VCDs and DVDs is mushrooming, Bollywood movies ranging from the latest release to older fare are available almost anywhere in Bangladesh. M. Hasan reveals that, per month, approximately seven million DVDs and VCDs of Bollywood films are traded –whether imported or produced domestically – in Bangladesh (Hasan 2008: 15-16). Bangladeshi viewers are able to consume Bollywood content around the clock from nearly 60 Indian cable channels. The consumption of Bollywood has left its mark on every sphere of Bangladeshi popular culture. Fashion, lifestyle, language, festivals, events, music listening habits, posters and print media are adorned with Bollywood stars, tunes and styles. Film critic Zakir Hossain Raju encapsulates the totalizing impact of Bollywood culture:

Passengers in long-haul public transport vehicles [...] are entertained by Bollywood films and film songs. Mobile companies offer Bollywood film



song as ringtones, and young people listen to the songs on their walk-mans. Such songs also blare from horn speakers, radio sets and audio players in shopping complexes, at family gatherings such as wedding and puberty rites, as well as at religious and social festivals in the cities and the villages. [...] All the serious dailies and weeklies also devote one or more sections to the gossip and news of the Bollywood film industry (Raju 2008: 157-158).

Many cultural personnel argue that the consumption of Bollywood content is a system of cultural imperialism of India over Bangladesh that is slowly demolishing the whole of Bengali culture, beginning with its silver screen. While the Bangladeshi cinema industry is in a tailspin and fighting for survival due to the dominance of Bollywood films, on 23 April 2010 the Commerce Minister of Bangladesh, Faruk Khan declared that, 'to boost the cinema industry' of Bangladesh, the government has decided to lift the ban on releasing and screening Indian movies in Bangladeshi cinema theatres (Alam 2010: n.p). This declaration triggered a fierce reaction among the artists, producers and directors of the Bangladeshi film industry, who believed that this would endanger thousands of industry-dependent livelihoods. On the other hand, distributors and cinema hall owners would in fact benefit from the screening of Bollywood films welcome this effort (Ullah 2010: n.p). They argued that they are experiencing huge losses as viewers are not going to the cinema theatres to watch substandard Dhallywood films which has resulted in a massive decline in the number of movie theatres from about 1600 to 600 over the last ten years (Alam 2010: n.p). Most of the popular cinemas, such as Shamoly, Gulistan, Naj, Lion, Star, Shabistan, and Tazmahal have already disappeared, becoming multi-story apartments. The dispute between the production and distribution arms of the film industry is therefore clear.

Film is an industrial product as much as an expression of culture. So, the old economic saying, 'Nurse the baby, protect the child and free the adult' could be taken as a model for the growth and development of Bangladeshi cinema. Many warn against lifting the ban on Indian films until such a time as Bangladeshi cinema can be said to have reached maturity – until the industry is producing a solid raft of qualitative films, year-on-year. Bangladeshi directors and producers had a number of requirements to make of the government before the ban could be lifted, including: constructing more multiplexes; the reduction of tax on ticket prices which is now almost 100%; regulation to stop video piracy; establishing a national film centre or national film institute; modernization of the state-owned BFDC; provision of bank loans or monitoring support offered by other financial institutions for financing films; integration of the film industry into the Ministry of Cultural Affairs rather than Ministry of Information; and renovation of existing cinemas. In spite of this profound and well-organised protest issuing from the heart of the film industry, Bangladesh released the Indian movie *Jore* (Force), on 23 December, 2011. The film was at first only exhibited in major cinemas; many Bollywood films have since obtained the Censorship Board's permission for more general release.

This provides some sense of the troubled, and highly politicized backdrop against which Bangladeshi national cinema has been fighting to establish its identity. While ‘the parameters of national cinema should be drawn at the site of consumption as much as at the site of production of films’ (Higson 1989: 36), in the Bangladesh film industry, Bollywood films are an integral and aggressive part of its consumption and constitute a threat to its definition as an economically viable and cultural institution. As Bangladesh was a part of India for many years, there are numerous similarities between the cultural patterns and practices of these two countries. Consequently, elements from the Bollywood film industry were synthesized in the cinematic tropes of Bangladesh and have become a naturalized part of its national culture. Perhaps these similarities persuaded the audience to watch Bollywood movies relentlessly even without subtitles or dubbing. Eventually, Bollywood has become an integral part of the Bangladeshi film industry. By incorporating different elements – song, unrealistic dance sequences, action, melodrama, romance, fantasy, colourful costume patterns and omnibus format from Bollywood – Bangladeshi popular cinema is becoming a hybrid form of cinematic representation.

At this point, it is necessary to look back to the film history of Bangladesh: Bangladeshi cinema did not always follow Bollywood’s lead. The most commercially successful movies that have broken box-office records in Bangladesh are *Rupban* (1965) before the Liberation period, and *Beder Meye Josna* (*Josna, the Daughter of a Snake-Charmer*, 1989) from the post-Liberation era. Both films constitute distinctive genera and industrial responses of Bangladesh, and both are based on Bangladeshi folk narratives. During the 1960s, the dominance of Urdu films (from Lahore, West Pakistan) almost wiped Bangladesh’s (then East Pakistan) films out of existence. The release and tent-pole success of *Rupban* not only secured the survival of the East Pakistan film industry, and films in the Bengali language, but also have created a new genre based on folk narratives. From this point on, a basis in folk narrative has been a cornerstone of Bangladeshi cinema.

In 1989, *Beder Meye Josna* earned a profit of Taka 150 million (US\$ 1.94 million in 2014) while its production cost was only Taka 2.5 million (US\$ 0.32 million in 2014). Its record-breaking success influenced the other prominent Bengali speaking film industry, in West Bengal (India), to remake it for their audience. In recent years, while the industry was suffering severely from Bollywoodization, another folk based film *Khairun Sundari* (*A Beautiful Lady, Khairun*, 2004) hit the box-office records, and was listed became the second highest-grossing movie in the history of Bangladeshi film after *Beder Meye Josna*. In Bangladesh the remake productions also mostly feature folk movies. So, folk stories are the particular generic narrative facet of Bangladesh that legitimize the appetite of local audience, synthesizing elements from the folk-theatre tradition of *Jatra*. Perhaps the reason why Bangladeshis call film or cinema *chobi* is because of its link with the picture-framed,

curated representations of *Jatra*; as Kabir says, ‘[w]hat we see on screen are mere photographed versions of “Jatra”’ (1989: 25). Fantasy, song, dance, melodramatic and loud acting style, colour-

ful costume, tears, infantile love affairs, comedy, happy endings, the use of subplots and stock characters, glorification of ideal womanhood — all these *Jatra*-inflected elements have generated a particular kind of representation in Bangladeshi cinema which carry forward the characteristics of folk narratives into the formation and definition of Bangladeshi popular cinema.

*Jatra* is a musical epic and a traditional form of Bangla theatre. It is mostly a combination of song, dance, and narrative and character acting style centering on stories from *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Puranas* and the historical and mythical life of Muslim legendary characters. Its origin is rooted in the religious ethos of the *Bhakti* cults of Hinduism that were initiated by Sri Chaitanya in the medieval period. It slowly incorporated secular, moral and social themes in the 19th century, and was well received by the rural masses of Bengal for its secular content and colourful presentation. With its melodramatic structure, contemporary *Jatra* offers very stylized acting which blends many theatrical elements from the East and the West. Use of monologues, colourful costume, props, Western musical instruments, character makeup, lighting effects, and act and scene divisions are among those Western elements which have diffused slowly into this traditional form, but still it displays the distinctive theatrical form of Bangladesh with its song-and-dance based musical ensembles and stylized rendering of poetry and ballads. The overwhelming popularity of *Jatra* influenced the directors of Bengal in texturing their films and inflecting the narrative content of Bengali cinema. Not only the popular films but also epic films like *Titas Ekti Nadir Nam* (*A River Named Titas*, 1973) and *Surya Dighal Bari* (*The Ominous House*, 1979), *Matir Moina* (*Clay Bird*, 2003) display *Jatra*'s influence. By structuring a narrative plot or incorporating a story telling approach, frequently using local music for describing the story or the emotion behind the scene or character and constructing stories as a notion and marker of collectiveness, those films more or less accommodate the different aspects and feeling of *Jatra* or the *folk* forms of Bangla theatre.

Over the last 40 years since independence, the Bangladeshi film industry and the popular film culture have explored many modes of expression, but there exists a coherent unity that is linked to the indigenous form of *Jatra*, even when ostensibly recreating Bollywood forms. Whilst maintaining several structural uniformities that derived from the folk form of theatres, Bangladeshi cinema has experimented with diverse content and themes in different times. As a result, some Bangladeshi film historians are inclined to categorize films according to the in subject matter. For instance, Aminul Islam classifies the genres of Bangladeshi cinema according to their centering themes, such as: Liberation War-based films, literature-based films, social films, action-based films, folk-based films, children's films, miracle or fantasy films, comedy films, biography films and mass movement and mass consciousness strengthening films (2008: 109-136). Alamgir Kabir has grouped

Bangladeshi films according to their content and construction. He suggested four broad groups of Bangladeshi films:

a) Films based on themes concerning the War of



[n]ational Liberation while retaining the conventional presentation format.

b) Non-plagiarised films of conventional format.

c) Plagiarised films.

d) Off-beat films having some or no relation with the existing conventional format (1979, 57).

Another – prevalent – form of classification is the simple division between mainstream and alternative films. Mainstream films are also known as industrial cinema or studio cinema, which goes in parallel with the formulaic film format of Hollywood by being broadly dependent on producer, studio, and a star centered story. In the above discussion, I have already taken a cursory glimpse at the characteristics of contemporary mainstream Bangladeshi films. In contrast, alternative films in Bangladesh are independent from of production to distribution, made completely outside the mainstream studio system, and are often, if not always, anti-establishment in content as well as mode of production. The alternative film movement in Bangladesh began in the 1980s and earned the localised vocabulary, 'Short Film'.

In the question of national cinema and national identity, many Bangladeshi film critics consider films from the alternative film movement as key resources in the formation of national identity, a sense of 'imagined community', cultural heritage and the spirit of the Liberation War. Fahmidul Haq observes that 'independent and art film-makers, have engaged themselves in dealing with identity questions of the country' (2009: 75). According to Raju: 'the 1971 [L]iberation [W]ar and its cultural-nationalist ideals come as a recurring theme in these films' (Raju, 2012). The existing national political climate that was controlled by the military dictatorship and which veered towards Islamic fundamentalism during the 1980s persuaded the directors to find a parallel means of cinematic expression, and to articulate the 'identity question' linked to the ethos of the Liberation War.

Most of the first generation independent film directors were involved in the film society movement before starting their cinematic ventures. Regular screenings of world famous masterpieces was one of the main activities of the film societies. This exposure to world films helped independent film makers to enrich their aesthetic sense of film. Thus the creation of an impression of real life and depiction of rural areas also became a strong tendency of independent films which they adopted from European films and New Indian Cinema. These films also concentrated on the portrayal of the cultural heritage and indigenous traditions of Bangladesh what they reckoned as a process of realist depiction, emphasising the spirit of Bengali nationalism. This aesthetic strategy for capturing such themes for the projection of 'ethno-symbolic' images of Bangladesh, I would like to argue with the concept of 'primitive passion' coined by Rey Chow. Writing about Chinese Fifth Generation films, Chow explains 'primitivism' as a nostalgic visualisation of the past, a

process of commodification where socially oppressed classes like women have been captured as 'primitive materials' (1995: 21). The Chinese Fifth generation film makers, purposely negotiated a self-exoticisation, a cultural exhibition of China by their projec-

tion of rural locations and poor populations, which according to Chow, is a process of the 'oriental's orientalism' (ibid.: 171). This self-projection is targeted to feed the urban audience who are not familiar with such traditions and also meets the demands of Western audience by providing an otherness. I want to link Chow's concept of 'primitive passion' to the visual strategies of the Bangladeshi independent films, where the tactic of exoticizing the national history and culture as 'primitive' or unique is evident.

Initially, the independent film directors employed the theme of the Liberation War, national myths, rural locations, as 'invented traditions' or 'primitivism' to resist the cultural crisis of the 1980s. Later they incorporated strategies to gain the attention of overseas audiences. Tareque Masud's *Matir Moina* (*The Clay Bird*, 2002) is a landmark piece that introduced Bangladesh to the international arena by winning the International Critics' Prize in 2002 at the Cannes Film Festival and received international funding from French company, MK2. Centering the theme on the Liberation War, *Matir Moina*, however, to some extent employs the tactic of exoticizing the national history through allegorical structures, using myth, images, rural festivals and traditions. This film thus displays Bangladeshi culture as 'primitive' or unique.

In accordance with the projection of the theme of the Liberation War alternative films included women's oppression and different cultural traditions as 'primitive materials' to exoticize the national images. They often sexualised the representation of national history and images by projecting women's suffering as the emblem of the nation. However, their passion for projecting the past (through the depiction of the theme of the Liberation War) enables the independent directors to express their personal memories as well as the collective memories of the war.

The Liberation War, however, is the singular defining event of Bangladeshi history and its national identity, and this centrality is no different in creating the concept of national cinema of Bangladesh. It is also evident that in other countries national cinema or a new wave of cinema has been formed, it emerged in the aftermath of a national traumatic event like war or a major political catastrophe. In Russia, after the Revolution of 1917, the cinema approached a new level that saw film as a tool for social change and several Russian films of these period became masterpieces in the history of world cinema. The same trend can be observed in the Italian cinema that was formed in the immediate aftermath of the Mussolini era. In Cuba, the birth of a new cinema resulted from the Cuban Revolution. In African countries, particularly in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, the articulation of the demand for freedom and sovereignty resulted in their films documenting versions of the war of independence. The same impulse is evident in Bangladeshi cinema, although expurgations of the Liberation War in other art forms have found more traction. Nevertheless, by exploring the ethos of the war, and the attendant traumas of conflict,

Bangladesh started its cinematic journey, with specific intent to manifest this event as the supreme one that holds its cultural expression, national memory and pride. If 'national cinema depends upon "an affirmation of self-identity" (Higson 1995: 07)

and 'revolve[s] around an intertextuality to which one attributes a certain historical weight' (Rosen 2006: 17), the Liberation War for Bangladeshi film directors is the unique historical chapter. They employed this historical event to represent a national experience of belonging and national identity beyond race, religion, cast and class. Given that the Liberation War provides Bangladeshi film directors with a major theme for filming that is linked with the identity question, they have returned to this episode of Liberation War again and again. Catherine Masud, a renowned film director of Bangladesh who migrated from USA to Bangladesh, says:

For Bangladesh, 1971 is the defining moment in national memory and identity. Not surprisingly, the Liberation War has figured prominently as a theme in a number of films, both those produced through the industry and outside of it. Although these films vary widely in terms of originality and quality, the creative inspiration of '71 is the main identifiable characteristic that sets Bangladesh cinema apart as a national phenomenon (Masud 2004: n.p).

Again, not all films about the Liberation War are faithful to its values, and not all of them support, or speak to an interest in, Bangladeshi national identity. In order to read films about the Liberation War, it is also imperative to understand the conditions in which they were made, and their relation to contemporary national political culture, and the place of the Liberation War in the nation building agenda of Bangladeshi nation state in different periods, as the term 'nation' has been re-defined in Bangladesh several times.

## Conclusion

The concept of national cinema is essentially linked with the notion of a distinctive national space that is supported by a state to resist external influences by affirming national self identity and consciousness. Bangladesh, however, as a developing country has so far been incompetent to produce a proper infrastructure to maintain the notion of nation on its screen or to assure artistic merit. Although the film industry and the audiences have been able to ignore the dominance of Hollywood films, Bollywood films are still the formidable factors that are increasingly blurring the cultural specificity of Bangladesh and its national film culture. The projection of national consciousness, cultural articulation of nation and historical events like Liberation War are also gradually fading or being re-fashioned in the landscape of the popular cinema of Bangladesh, particularly in the heyday of globalization. Again, it must be noted that Bangladesh is among those few countries in the world which has unique events and historical chapters marked by periods of revolution, such as the Liberation War and the Language movement of 1952, which contribute to a strong sense of national identity among its inhabitants. Even with a lack of institutional support, efforts to sustain and cohere national identity in film do not disappear; rather the Liberation War emerges as the most defining source of collective pride on the Bangladeshi screen again and again.



## Notes

1. Rickshaw painting: The rickshaw is one of the popular forms of transport of Bangladesh and rickshaw paintings are the art works that are fixed on the side and lower rear bar of rickshaws, drawn in a tin plate with bright colours by the local craftsman.
2. Constituent Assembly of Bangladesh, Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Article 9 (Dacca: Government of Bangladesh, 1972).
3. Aminul Islam, *Bangladesher Cholochochitro Madhhomey Lokoshahitter Proyog: Ekti Shomajtattik Shomikhhkha* (The Function of Folk Literature in Bangladeshi Film: A sociological Analysis). A research project funded by UGC (University Grant Commission) Bangladesh in 2009-10 budget year, (unpublished).
4. *Chobi* is a Bengali word which means picture.

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