

THE LIBERATION STRUGGLES OF A COUNTRY AND A FESTIVAL

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Bangladesh, though small and underdeveloped, is the seventh largest country in the world by the size of its population. Despite being a country with a multitude of problems, Bangladesh takes great pride in its long-standing rich, colourful, cultural heritage. In fact, Bangladesh is one of the only countries in the world where people sacrificed their lives to protect their own language.

Some Bengali youths were shot dead by the Police while participating in a march of protest on the 21st February 1952 as part of the movement to establish Bengali as one of the state languages of the then Pakistan. This movement became the symbol of national identity of the Bengali people and subsequently led to the struggle for independence of the country from Pakistan. The 21st of February has subsequently been designated by the UNESCO as 'International Mother Language Day' in recognition of the struggle and ultimate sacrifice of human lives to protect the mother tongue.

According to a newspaper report, the earliest film screenings in the territory of present-day Bangladesh were held as early as 1898 in Bhola, at the Crown Theatre and at the Jagannath College in Dhaka in 1902. Hira Lal Sen, who is known as a pioneer of filmmaking in this country, also arranged bioscope shows in his native village of Bagjuri, Manikganj at the same time. The first filmmaking process started under the financial help and patronage of the Nawab family of Dhaka. A short film, Sukumari, was made in 1928. It was a silent movie and the actors were cast from the Nawab family. Interestingly, at that time, it was impossible to find an actress to perform. Nawabzada Nasrullah played the male role and Syed Abbas Sobhan, a young man, was chosen to play the female role. Unfortunately the copy of the film was never available for the public screening. But there were a few private screenings.

The next big step taken after the success of Sukumari, was a silent feature film, The Last Kiss, made by the same group. The film was directed by Ambju Gupta and produced by the Dhaka East Bengal Cinematograph Society. Among the cast and crew were Nawabzada Khwaja Nasrullah, Khwaja Adil, Khwaja Akmal, Khwaja Zahir, Khwaja Shahed, Syed Shabob Alam, Sholler Roy, Lolita, Harimati, Charubala, Debbela and Khwaja Azad (cameraman). The film was released in 1931. Unfortunately the print of this film has been disappeared.

The Real film-making in Bangladesh started in 1956. After the language movement in 1952, Bengali nationalism was at its height. A group of the enlightened people in Dhaka to consider the possibilities of film-making in the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). There some filmmakers from West Pakistan who attended the meeting vigorously denied any possibilities. They argued that the climate was not suitable for film-making etc. Mr. Abdul Jabbar Khan, a theatre activist from Kamalapur, Dhaka argued that if a part of a film can be made in here then why not a full feature film?

He challenged the board and decided to make a film himself. There were no technicians locally available at that time. So Jabbar Khan hired some technicians from Calcutta (Kolkata) and started shooting the film with a 16mm Aimo camera which was a silent movie camera. After a great deal of effort, the film, Mukh-O-Mukhosh (The Face and the Mask) was finally released in 1956. It was the first Bengali film made in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) with local artists. Mukh-O-Mukhosh is a conventional family drama of good versus evil made in a theatrical style. The film is remembered mainly for its historical importance. Soon after, filmmaking became very popular in this country. Film-makers like Zahir Raihan, Khan Ataur Rahman, Subhash Dutta enriched the film industry.

During the war of liberation in Bangladesh, a group of filmmakers visited the war zone and made a few films to gain international support. The film by Zahir Raihan, Stop Genocide, successfully raised world awareness. After the liberation, as expected, there was no significant change in filmmaking of Bangladesh. The films were of poor technical and artistic quality. The stories were very similar conventional love stories, including make-believe stories of love between the rich and poor. There were a few exceptions by such directors as Alamgir Kabir, Shubhash Dutta, Khan Ataur Rahman, Amjad Hossain, Abdus Samad, Badal Rahman and Moshiuddin Shaker who kept Bangladeshi cinema alive. But the overall situation was never satisfactory.

It was in this context that a vibrant "film society movement" developed in Bangladesh soon after achieving independence in 1971. This movement contributed to the transformation of many film lovers into filmmakers, some of whom have won national and international repute. Film makers like Tareque Masud, Morshedul Islam, Tanvir Mokkammel are well known for their work. Recently Tareque Masud's film The Clay Bird gained the Critics award at the Cannes Film Festival 2002.

It is noteworthy that Bangladesh probably ranks, after Hollywood and Bollywood, among the countries producing the most number of films in a year. In 2005, Bangladesh produced 102 feature films. Unfortunately, the absolute majority of these films are made for Bangladeshi viewers only. Most of the films are typically around three-hours long and have no subtitles. And the quality of these films is nowhere near a satisfactory level.

The Rainbow Film Society is one of the pioneering film societies in Bangladesh, having been active since 1977. It has many activities worth mentioning, including the publication of the film magazine Celluloid. Most importantly, the Rainbow Film Society regularly holds an International Film Festival in Bangladesh.

This year, the organisation held its 9th International Film Festival where over 30 foreign delegates from all over the world participated with more than 150 films from 30 countries. The participating countries were Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Congo, China, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Iceland, India, Iran, Ireland, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand,

Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Russia, South Korea, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland, UK, USA and the host country.

Among the international guests were Peter Malone and Nick Mayers from Australia, Anwar Jamal, Sreelekha Mukharjee, Buddhadeb Das Gupta and Shekhor Das from India, Necati Sonmez from Turkey, Mostafa Kamal (myself) from the UK, Amir Samabati from Iran, Beneth Ratnayeke from Sri Lanka, Simojuka Ruipo from Finland and others.

The main festival venues - the Public Library and the National Museum auditorium were packed with huge gatherings of film lovers at all times. People of all ages queued for tickets and patiently waited to get inside the auditorium. Other venues for the festival were the Goethe Institute, the Russian Cultural Centre and the Cine Complex at the Bashundhara City Mall.

The festival was inaugurated by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, Mr. M. Morshed Khan. More than five hundred people watched the film *The Cafe Transit* (Iran-France) by Kambozia Patrovi on the opening night. On the second day of the festival a big rally was organised in Dhaka city with colourful banners and posters. On Wednesday, the 25th of January, the festival ended with an award ceremony.

The Best Film Award and The International Critics Prize were given to *The Cafe Transit*, while the Best Director award was given to Sekhar Das, the director of *Krantikal* (India). The Best Actor and Best Actress awards were given to David Wenham, *Three Dollars* (Australia) and Roopa Ganguly, *Krantikal* (India), respectively. A festival like this is very important for Bangladesh, where local filmmakers often claim that local audiences will not accept serious films. The Dhaka International Film Festival has proven that audiences like and appreciate serious films as most of the screenings were full.

Just one thing to be mentioned is that organising such a festival in Bangladesh is very difficult. The first problem is in raising enough money. The second and the most painful process is getting government permission to hold such a festival, release films from the airport and get the censor board's permission for each film. Often it takes months. The government of Bangladesh, especially the information ministry which controls the film sector, must reconsider their position and become more supportive to the organisers. It will be good both for the festival and for the country.

Awards

International Jury Awards

1. Best Film

Café Transit,
Directed by Kambozia Partovi (Iran-France)

- 2. International Jury Director's Award Sekhar Das, *Krantikaal* (India)
- 3. Best Actor's Award (Female) Roopa Ganguly, *Krantikaal* (India)
- 4. Best Actor's Award (Male) David Wenham, *Three Dollars* (Australia)
- 5. International Jury Special Award *Mama's Guest*
Directed by Dariush Mehrjui (Iran)

International Jury

Peter Malone (Australia)
Anwar Jamal (India)
Mijarul Quayes (Bangladesh)

International Film Critics Federation -FIPRESCI Award

Café Transit, Directed by Kambozia Partovi (Iran-France)

Fipresci Jury

Necati SÖNMEZ (Turkey)
Mostafa Kamal (U.K.)
Ali Ahmed (Bangladesh)

Women Filmmakers: International Jury Awards

- 1. Best Documentary *Women of the Holy Kingdom*
Directed by Sharmin Obaid-Chinoy (Pakistan)
- 2. Best Feature *Madur*
Directed by Jayashree Bhattacharya (India)

International Jury

Kishwar Kamal (Bangladesh)
Sreelekha Mukharjee (India)
Mahmuda Chowdhury (Bangladesh)

Independent Films: Jury Award

- 1. Best Documentary *My Dad, My Mom*
Directed by Iao Bo (China)
- 2. Best Feature *La Guerra*
Directed by Luiso Berdejo (Spain)

Jury

Moshihuddin Shaker (Bangladesh)
Sajjad Sharif (Bangladesh)
Rashed Rain (Bangladesh)

Independent Films

International Film Critics Association of Bangladesh – IFCAB Award

Migrant Workers Are Not Terrorists!,

Directed by Simojukka Ruippo and Jouni Hokkanen (Finland)

IFCAB Jury

Rafiquzzaman (Bangladesh)

Rabiul Hussain (Bangladesh)

Sabbir Chowdury (Bangladesh)

Children's Film: Best Audience Award

Thutturi, Directed by P. Sheshaadri (India)

Audience Award

1. *When the Right One Comes Along*

Directed by Stefan Hillebrand (Switzerland)

2. *Herbert*

Directed by Suman Mukhopadhyay (India)