



**THE OTHER  
NATIONAL**  
CINEMA IN BANGLADESH



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boobook



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Author's preface	09	
	14	
Decolonisation of cinema in Bangladesh	15	101 [ Zahir Raihan's Bangladesh saga
	36	126 [
The problematics of cinematic art: Bangladesh experience	37	127 [ Alamgir Kabir's social cinema
	54	144 [
Cinema of Bangladesh: in search of excellence	55	145 [ Ontorjatra (Homeland)
	74	164 [
On government grant for filmmaking	75	165 [ Rokeya
	86	180 [
Our visual culture and film society movement	87	181 [ Two films of otherness
	100	192 [
		193 [ Minimalist activism: documentaries of Yasmine Kabir
		210 [
		211 [ The major shorts
		228 [
		229 [ The later war films
		252 [
		253 [ Documentaries and the national cinema
		274 [
		275 [ Under Construction
		280 [
		281 [ The new arrivals
		296 [

## table of contents



## Author's Preface

I have been writing articles on film for quite a long time now. Most of these pieces were produced to satisfy immediate demands of the editors of various journals including publications of film societies. First drafts of some of those came out as notes of the courses I conducted for film societies and other organisations involved in promoting the cause of serious cinema-studies in this country. I wrote only a few of those completely as a personal choice and from being felt compelled to express my thoughts and opinions on a particular subject. However, now looking back, I sense that two underlying thought processes always guided me in those writings. Firstly, I always wanted to examine the possibilities of the advent of National Cinema in Bangladesh and ventured into a critical examination of the offbit films and the alternative cinema movement in Bangladesh. When I read these together now, some of which were written almost three decades back, I sense that these two streams of thought bind almost all the articles! Going even further, I would suggest that these articles somehow connect the two themes and amalgamate

them into a leitmotif of my writings from my early adulthood to this mature age.

I have been a film society activist since the late 1970s. From the early days of my involvement with this movement, writing became one of my major areas of activism here. Even I ventured into publishing and editing a Little Magazine dedicated to film as an art form. On the other hand, I had the opportunity to observe the efforts of the early offbit filmmakers and the struggle of the alternative film movement from a very close quarter. In fact, the alternative film movement that set sail in the mid-1980s was a logical extension of the film society movement, and it was our comrades in the film society movement who pioneered this activism. Naturally, I followed keenly the development of the alternative film project and its various nuances like embracing new technology, experimenting with alternative modes of financing and screening, emancipation of women in alternative filmmaking and the rise of documentary films. At the same time, I, along with my co-activists, kept my eyes open to the developments happening in the mainstream cinema world of Bangladesh. I saw the brisk business of the '70s come crippling down with the appearance of video technology, and its demise was all but complete with the advent of digital technology and the internet. The mainstream films became copycat of Indian Hindi films, and then turned violent, abusive and pornographic. Spectators refused to tag along with this vandalised entertainment, and the cinema theatres across the country started to shut down rapidly.

I, as a film society activist, have a fair bit of understanding of the development of National Cinemas across the globe. My interest mainly focuses on the cinema related events that took place in the communist countries during the Cold War era, the national cinema of Iran, the revolutionary cinema of the Latin American countries, post-colonial developments in the cinemas of the African continent and obviously, the parallel cinema movement of India in the 1970s and

1980s. Having read about these phenomena, watched relevant films and observed the events that have been taking place in Bangladesh, I have developed some convictions regarding the prospects of a National Cinema in Bangladesh.

The alternative initiatives in making and showing films in Bangladesh have the right kind of body language to nurse and nurture some kind of a national cinema. I must hasten to add that the alternative film movement, in its journey of more than three decades, has gone through many phases of evolution. It has various offshoots and variants. Nowadays, we recognise an alternative work more through a subjective recognition of some virtues and values rather than through a set of strictly defining factors. In one of my articles in this book, I have identified three different streams of filmmaking activities in Bangladesh. Of these, the first cinema is the mainstream one, while the third cinema is the alternative trend and the second cinema is something that pendulums between the two. It may be argued that the borderline between the second and the third cinema is often blurred, and it is a matter of persistent critical analyses of these films to understand, evaluate and categorise them. The filmmakers of these two trends are trying their hands in experiments with new finances both local and international, release of their films in conventional cinema theatres, in the OTT platforms and in the alternative auditoriums and halls. However, until this day, the main challenge that remains to be met and negotiated for these films is their limited success in reaching the audience of this country. My understanding is that to graduate into the grooves of a true national cinema, these films have to have a greater degree of access and acceptability among the local audience.

Most of these articles were originally written in Bengali. I have translated them in English for this book and, in the process, have done the necessary editing to contemporise the thoughts and analyses, and to align them to be read together as chapters of a book. Some of the articles are new and I have written those in English keeping in mind

the requirements of this book. However, for the readers of this book, this difference of origin of the articles will not bear any significance. None of these appeared before in English. While translating I remained mindful not to sound repetitive, put forward any suggestion, or hint that assumed any prior knowledge of the topic.

Still, I believe, these do not answer the question as to why I felt the necessity of this book in English. Firstly, I would like to make a case for the offbeat and alternative cinema in Bangladesh. 'Cinema in Bangladesh' is slowly making its entry into the academic and intellectual debates of South Asian Film-Studies. As expected, the interest in the cinema of Bangladesh is mostly focused on the study of it from the perspective of visual anthropology and as the artifacts of a peripheral popular culture far removed from the centres of the globalised cine-phenomena. There are, of course, efforts to introduce the history of Cinema in Bangladesh as a range of activities that include the commercial ventures as well as the offbeat initiatives. However, attempts to read the offbeat and alternative gamut of films as purely cinematic undertakings is somewhat missing. I believe this book would serve as an introductory work in that direction. Secondly, as I have already mentioned, I would like to examine the possibilities of the rise of a National Cinema in Bangladesh through the evolution of the alternative cinema movement. The first four articles of this book make an attempt to assess and evaluate this possibility from a generalised point of view, while the articles written later are kind of criticisms and analyses of individual films in my effort to gauge this possibility at micro level. I believe, put together, these articles would make a serious case for the development of a National Cinema in Bangladesh. And through this book in English, I would like to draw the attention of the relevant international audience to this phenomenon.

I want to remember with gratitude and reverence the pioneer offbeat filmmaker in Bangladesh and the friend, philosopher and guide of the alternative film movement in Bangladesh, Alamgir Kabir on this



occasion. This book, and for that matter any book written by me, would not have been possible without the lessons and advice I received from him during our early days in this movement. He was the father figure for a generation of film enthusiasts of our country. His books 'Cinema in Pakistan' and 'Film in Bangladesh' were sources of inspiration for this book. My thanks goes to all the filmmakers whose films form the basis of this book. They have made their films available to me in various formats so that repeat viewing was possible. I also express my gratitude to the writers of books on Bangladeshi cinema that I used as the primary sources of information in this book. I have, of course, given due credit to them in each individual case as references and endnotes with each article. I am indebted to my copy-editor for her knowledgeable and ardent input to make this book textually precise and grammatically error-free to an extent. Her efforts helped to bring a great degree of clarity to my original text. Finally, my thanks to Nokta Prokashoni for their interest in publishing this book. I hope this will be another quality production in keeping with the standard set by them.

Mahmudul Hossain

Dhaka, October 2022



## DECOLONISATION OF CINEMA IN BANGLADESH

The idea of decolonisation is a political one. In the three decades after World War II, the colonies in the east and the south of the world became independent one after another. This is the basic fact of decolonisation. It may be argued that discontent and violence had persisted in the colonies since long, and those struggles by the people in the colonies symbolised their quest for decolonisation. Seen that way, decolonisation had been a continuous process since the establishment of the colonies which was thought to have concluded during the second half of the last century.

With the realisation of political decolonisation, some terms like 'modernisation', 'under development', 'globalisation', and 'globalised capitalism' became the vogue. Practically, in the decolonised spaces these terms, their different applications and relevant reactions took control of the lives of the people. It was expected in quite a naive manner that political decolonisation would, finally, give power to the exploited masses, and they would be able to control their destiny in all the spheres of their lives. In reality, nothing of the sort happened. It was felt strongly

that political independence could only bear fruits when economic, cultural and psychological decolonisation would be achieved.

Going back in time, we would see that colonising forces had destroyed or made ineffective all traditional institutions to establish full control over the people. As a result, all local institutions, both material and philosophical, had become extinct or lost patronisation. People in the colonies had suffered from an inferiority complex; they had been attracted to the thoughts and objects presented by the colonisers and had believed in their superiority. In the same line, the concept of modernity had been presented as a project of the colonisers, and it had been implemented with a flair of superiority wrapped all over it. The colonisers had preached:

...only the West developed proper scientific procedures, while Babylonian astronomy lacked a mathematical foundation, Indian sciences lacked rational experiments, Chinese historiography lacked the Thucydidean paradigm and Asian jurisprudence lacked the strict juridical procedures of canonical law; although musical understanding and polyphonic music could be found everywhere in the world, only the West developed rational harmonic music, musical notation, and instruments such as the organ, the piano and the violin; while the principles of pointed arch and dome were known and practiced in the Orient, only the Occident developed them into a systematic style in medieval architecture; print was known in China, but only the West acquired a press; ...

(Shultz-Angler, 2007, pp. 37-38)

The underlying point was simple. It had been in Europe where all logical and disciplined successes in technological, scientific and social sciences had been achieved. Then they had gone out to the east

Period	Political environment	Social and economic condition	History of Film
First half of the 1950s	Language Movement takes place. Left influences local politics. First election gives verdict against Muslim League.	Economy is heavily dependent on agriculture. Urbanisation begins.	Local Bengali films start their journey formally with 'Mukh O Mukhosh'.
Second half of the 1950s	Left ideology is still very dominant in politics.	Urbanisation grows steadily with a trend of ideology based cultural practices.	Cinemas depicting honest pictures of the lives of the people of this land are made. The trend continues as a low key tendency into the sixties.
The 1960s (Trend - 1)	Martial Law is in effect.	Growth of consumer capitalism is observed. The middle class sees growth and becomes more ambitious.	As a fight for existence, the Bengali producers and directors digress into making Urdu films and films based on folk tales. Films on folk tales become very popular, and cinema reaches the mass.
The 1960s (Trend - 2)	Secular Bengali Nationalism and mass upsurge develops against military rule.	Middle class gains economically and socially and sees the opportunity of gaining political power.	Urban middle class life is projected through romantic melodramas. Film Society Movement commences.

**THE OTHER NATIONAL**  
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1971	Liberation War takes place	The country is overwhelmed by scorched earth, genocide and refugee experience.	'Stop Genocide' and other war documentaries are sponsored by the Mujibnagar Government.
The 1970s	Politics fails, and military rule and religious fundamentalism returns.	Crisis of national identity returns. Social and economic power is usurped by the urban miscreants. Middle class struggles to survive.	Violent and abusive cine culture begins. Films of Alamgir Kabir fight a lone battle. 'Surja Dighal Bari' is the first film made with a government grant.
The 1980s	The nation undergoes a long struggle against military rule. Religious fundamentalism gains ground cashing in on the ideological bankruptcy of middle class politics and also based on the financial strength gained through the availability of petrodollar from the Middle East.	The crisis of identity becomes acute leading to the advent of a weak and amoral capitalistic economy.	Mainstream Cinema is fully captured by black money. Alamgir Kabir continues his struggle against the trend. Middle class moves away from the cinema halls. Video culture develops. The alternate film movement begins its journey.

The 1990s	Urban elites promote two-party democracy.	Local rogue capital and international monopoly capital take control of the rising economy. So-called globalisation and the fall of communist states create a void in idealism and patriotism.	Film business faces a severe crisis with the arrival of cable TV. All negative trends continue. The alternate film movement shows promise.
The 2000s	Semblance of democracy continues. Religious bigotry becomes influential by the day.	Global capitalism flourishes. A section of urban society enters the period of hyper-consumerism. Internet technology and mobile phone gadgets make fundamental changes in social behaviour.	Mainstream cinema becomes abusive with cut-piece culture. This kind of cinema is totally rejected by the audience. Film Industry is in a recession. Digital technology makes entry into filmmaking. Alternate finance arrives. A trend of middle cinema begins with a number of new filmmakers. Independent documentaries make best use of light and cheap digital technology.

However, it must be acknowledged that the cinema in Bangladesh did not see the arrival of a filmmaker whose works could be considered as a beacon ushering the process of decolonisation or advent of alternative modernity. Bangladesh doesn't have filmmakers



## THE PROBLEMATICS OF CINEMATIC ART: BANGLADESH EXPERIENCE

Though art cinema cannot be reduced to textual formulae, it can be defined through its consecrating functions, which differentiate high from low in accord with its myriad contextual circumstances. For decades, producers and distributors in almost every industrial sector have found some notions of the high useful, so it is little wonder that the art cinema impulse has appeared in most cinematic contexts, regardless of commercialism. It is this blend of cultural aspiration and commercial flexibility that has culminated in a genre so multiform that theorists with investments in older, text-based understandings of it can only throw up their hands when searching for a more compelling definition of the genre.

(Andrews, 2010, p. 66)

The term 'Art Cinema' in itself is problematic. Today it is more like a post-dated cheque which the bank is reluctant to honour. It

and malcontent about its functioning among the relevant quarters. We would like this situation to change and expect that measures would be taken to put a transparent, knowledgeable and effective process in place.

### Government Grant for Filmmaking at a glance from 1976-77 to 2017-18

The year of grant	Number of films receiving grant	Number of completed and released films	Number of Incomplete, not made and not released films
1976-77	4	3	1
1981-82	4	4	0
1982-83	5	2	3
1993-94	3	3	0
1994-95	4	2	2
1995-96	3	3	0
1996-97	3	2	1
2000-01	2	1	1
2002-03	2	2	0
2003-04	2	2	0
2004-05	2	2	0
2007-08	3	2	1
2008-09	3	2	1
2009-10	6	5	1
2010-11	5	4	1
2011-12	6	3	3
2012-13	7	4	3
2013-14	7	5	2
2014-15	5	2	3
2015-16	6	3	3
2016-17	5	0	
2017-18	5	0	