

**CINEMA OF  
BANGLADESH**  
A BRIEF HISTORY



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# CINEMA OF BANGLADESH A BRIEF HISTORY

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**TAREQUE MASUD**



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**three  
great  
filmmakers**

**for**

**ZAHIR RAIHAN**

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**ALAMGIR KABIR**

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## CHAPTER . one

### **the beginning**

In Bangladesh, there is a substantial film culture and a modest film industry. The film industry was established in the middle of the 1950s, though there were a few earlier instances of filmmaking. The business of the industry was sound in the 1960s and 1970s but declined in the 1980s and 1990s. In the new millennium, the industry declined even further. However recently there have been some signs that the industry is reviving with a major contribution from the independent sector. This chapter narrates the beginning phase of filmmaking in Bangladesh.

This chapter (and the next chapter) is written following Raju's (2015) 'interpretative' method in discussing the history of Bangladeshi cinema. It has not been possible to interpret everything equally due to the brief nature of the book. Therefore, the book sometimes may seem following the conventional method of what and when things happened. This chapter mainly focuses on the beginning of cinema in colonial Bengal and the earlier initiatives of making film in Dhaka.

## 1.2 First Exhibition, First Theatre

Lumiere Brothers, after making and the projection of their very first film in 1895, came to undivided India in the following year to show their magical invention. On 7<sup>th</sup> July of 1896, six film projections were arranged in the Watson Hotel in Mumbai. First two films were about watering a garden and breast-feeding an infant. However, the first film projection in the undivided Bengal was by John Stefens in the year 1896-97. Stefens' first exhibited films were also Lumiere-type with images of a train moving, a horse running, a man watering the street, and so on. Father Lafon from St. Xaviers College exhibited films in Kolkata at the same time. He used film as a tool of teaching. Following them, an East-Bengali filmmaker Hiralal Sen came forward to exhibit films. He became fascinated by Stefens's projection and met him to learn the art of exhibiting films. Hiralal got no help from Stefens, but Father Lafon helped him by showing him a few technicalities of cinema. In 1898, Hiralal Sen started film projection under the banner of his own company 'The Royal Bioscope'.

According to Hayat (1987), the very first film projection in East-Bengal took place in the sub-district of Bhola on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1898. Hiralal Sen was the exhibitor. Later, on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1898 film projection took place in Dhaka at the Crown Theatre at Sadarghat. Crown Theatre was famous for staging dramas of troupes invited from Kolkata. Bradford Cinematograph from Kolkata exhibited films for the first time in Dhaka where the range of ticket prices was from 8 ana to 3 Rupees. The subject matters of the films exhibited



## CHAPTER . two

### the mainstream cinema

**M**ukh O Mukhosh was the first full-length sound film of the then East Pakistan which was made in 1956. *The Last Kiss* was the first full-length feature but that was a silent film. From 1931 to 1956, some documentaries were made in Dhaka but there was no feature film in this period. On the other hand, hundreds of films were made in the neighboring industry in Kolkata during the same period, but there was almost no participation of Muslims from East Bengal. The reason behind it was that everything in this region was Kolkata-centric since the British period. Although the Muslims of East Bengal started progressing in many respects, but they were completely absent in the cinema sector. On the other hand, Nawabs' initiative of filmmaking in Dhaka could be identified as an amateur effort. After the Partition, suddenly Dhaka became significant. Many talented Muslims migrated to Dhaka from other parts of Bengal, but no one came forward to make films. Historically, there was neither tradition nor practice of filmmaking among the Bengali-Muslims from both parts of Bengal.



Skecth of Abdul Jabbar Khan by Madhu Mondol.

Lohani, *Matir Pahar* (Clay Mountain) by Mohiuddin and *Akash Ar Mati* (The Sky and the Earth) by Fateh Lohani. Being the first project approved by Film Development Corporation(FDC) *Asiya* was released in 1960. After *Mukh O Mukhosh*, four films were released in 1959 that included *Akash Ar Mati*, *Matir Pahar* and Ehtesham's *Edesh Tomar Amar* (This is Our Country). Initially, EPFDC considered experience in filmmaking as a pre-condition of approval for making films. Because of this policy, in the first phase only a few films were made. The first films made in EPFDC were failures both in popular and critical senses. Two films by Fateh Lohani, especially *Asiya* was a failed attempt of copying eminent Indian Bengali director Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) especially in cinematic styles. But the film got two awards from both sides of Pakistan.

**Table 1: Selected Films from the 1960s**

Title	Director
<i>Jago Hua Savera</i> (Day Shall Dawn, 1960)	Aaejay Kardar
<i>Kancher Deyal</i> (The Glass Wall, 1963)	Zahir Raihan
<i>Roopban</i> (1965)	Salahuddin
<i>Nodi O Nari</i> (The River and the Woman, 1965)	Sadeq Khan
<i>Sirajuddoula</i> (1967)	Khan Ataur Rahman
<i>Abirvab</i> (The Arrival, 1968)	Subhas Dutta

In this context, a significant film was made in 1959. Aaejay Kardar from West Pakistan directed *Jago Hua Savera* (Day Shall Dawn), based on the everyday life of the fishermen of East Bengal. The film won awards from



Sketch Of Zahir Raihan, a great filmmaker from 1960s by Madhu Mondol.

Alamgir Kabir (1979) divided the films made in the 1970s into four categories. These were – war films, plagiarized films, non-plagiarized films and offbeat films. According to him, since independence to 31st January 1977, 163 films were released. Among them, there were 5 war films, 8 offbeat films, 25 non-plagiarized original screenplay films and 125 plagiarized films. The viewers of Bangladesh mercilessly rejected both offbeat and plagiarized films. In spite of that, the reasons for making so many plagiarized films were the incapability of writing original screenplay and the desire of making money with less effort. Some directors were inspired by others who made money through plagiarised films (such as *Dost Dushman* [Friend and Foe, 1977] by Dewan Nazrul which was plagiarized from the Indian blockbuster hit film, *Sholay* [1975]).

On the eve of the war of 1965, the government of Pakistan being influenced by nationalist jingoism stopped importing Indian films. After liberation, the government of Bangladesh also stopped importing Urdu films in 1973. Only Bengali films were exhibiting in theatres. At that time, film was the only medium of entertainment for public. Films were produced hastily to fulfill the demand of the public. They developed an interesting method of plagiarism as Kabir (1979) mentions. From Dhaka they used to go to Kolkata and record soundtracks of some Hindi and Bengali films. After coming back to Dhaka, they used to write the script of films upon that record. In the 1980s, there was no need of going to Kolkata as the films were available due to VCR/VCP technologies.

house films with political messages that they could relate to with the contemporary Bangladesh. *Agami* and *Hooliya* used to be screened together in different parts of the country. These two films were commercially successful. After this, an independent short film movement outside of the industry began and new directors became engaged with filmmaking. Mostofa Kamal's *Protyaborton* (Return, 1986), Abu Sayeed's *Abartan* (The Cycle, 1989), Tareque Masud's *Adam Surat* (The Inner Strength, 1989) and Enayet Karim Babul's *Chakki* (The Ring, 1986) are some notable short films of the 1980s. Critics and audience appreciated some of these films based on the Liberation War and social problems and for their comparatively modern filmmaking style. The next chapter will discuss elaborately the history and characteristics of independent cinema in Bangladesh.

## 2.5 The 1990s: Teenage Love and Ultra Violent Films

The number of viewers of the industry decreased in the 1980s due to the availability of VCR technology. The audience got an alternative medium of entertainment. They now had the opportunity of watching foreign films, largely Hindi and Bengali and partially English films, at home. They did not have the opportunity of watching Pak-Indian films earlier due to the state ban. This ban ensured the protection of business of local films and earned the government a great amount of revenue through high entertainment tax. But this system did not ensure the quality of films. The standard of films did not improve due to the absence of foreign competition. So, after the emergence of new viewing technology, this unprepared