

Asian films - survival or revival : Bangladesh

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Introduction

Calcutta was the centre of film making and film industry in this part of the region until the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. After partition Bangladesh, the then East Pakistan, was lacking in primary film-making, film production know-how and capital for film production. But the audience was there and they were satisfied with Bangla films imported from Calcutta, now a part of India and Bombay and later from Lahore in the then West Pakistan. It was not until 1957, when at the Government initiative Film Development Corporation (FDC) was set up, that production of feature film started here. In the meantime documentary films were produced by government departments and private agencies which were, however, processed, developed and edited either in Calcutta or Bombay.

At present about one hundred Bangla feature films are produced every year in Dhaka exhibited throughout the country in its 550 cinema halls. Apart from government owned studio of FDC there are four privately owned studios offering facilities to film-makers. The FDC has four studios, processing facilities, colour lab and all other modern equipment. The progress that has been made quantitatively is quite spectacular during the last five years. Increase in the number of professional artistes, technician cameramen, editors and directors has been no less spectacular. Today over 100,000 people are engaged directly or indirectly in this industry.

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Audience Trend

In the early days of fifties and sixties the cinema culturally and commercially depended on films imported from India and the then West Pakistan. While the Bengali films from Calcutta were of certain artistic standard, the Bombay and Lahore films were lucid and commercial in character. The above film centres had in the meantime, turned to Star System and that trend of star-craziness was visible here. Popular artistes and popular songs were the criteria for acceptance of a film by the audience. The advent of local production in 1956 with the first locally produced film "Mukh-O-Mukhosh" (The Face and the Musk) did little change to that trend. However, this film, shoddy in production quality proved an instant success at the box office, but had no effect on the then audience trend. After that upto early sixties, about fifty films were produced, most of them commercial failures. The Hindi and Urdu films from Bombay and Lahore still met the bulk requirements of the local cinema halls.

But the trend changed in 1965. A local Director Salahuddin exploited the Bengali rural population's fascination for 'Jatra' (rural operatta) and his production "Roopban" (Princess) changed the character and basis of Bengali cinema. Even after 20 years in certain form that trend continues with a number of producers opting for "Jatra-based folk cinema". The absurdities of the stories or the crudities of the technique are ignored by the audience. Before considering the other trends of plagiarism of Indian Hindi films it should be kept in mind that the bulk audience in Bangladesh comprises of illiterate poor and lower middle class people. The middle class in general was ignoring this media since sixties when import of Bengali films from Calcutta, India, had been banned.

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The middle class inertia for the films produced here is understandable. Their taste for technical quality, well-written story and good acting has made them allergic to local productions. The market is for the peasants who flock to the towns to see a film, the rickshaw-pullers in the cities and their illiterate womenfolk. They became the target of the film-makers. As the middle class and educated viewers alienated themselves from local films, the industry fully catered to their traditional audience. With advent of Video, the middle class found their choice in the imported English and Hindi films. On the other-hand, besides concentrating on folklores, the film-makers fully turned to plagiarism. Stories, songs and even sequences from Hindi films were copied in the Bengali films. Violence and sex found their way. Kung-fu in crude form was the current trend in the seventies and eighties.

The war of independence against Pakistan occupation army in 1971 also had some effect on the film stories. In fact, it gave birth to a new kind of cinema, a cinema that dared to venture into a fresh area both in form and content. The trend began with some wartime documentaries initiated by the famous director Zahir Raihan who became a martyr. The films like "Stop Genocide" (Innocent Million), Ora Egaro Jon (They were Eleven), Arunodoyer Agni Shakhshor (In the flames of Sunrise) were the unique productions marking an era in the Bangladesh films.

But as the war-theme era subsided, the producers went back to their early formula -- films with tears, songs, gaudy dance sequences, fist fights with stage-oriented melodramatic treatment. This present trend of the last five years, was, however, interrupted by some films with social awareness. These are "Golpai Ekhan Traine" (Golapi boards a Train), Ekhono Samaye (This Time) etc. But plagiarised films continue to capture the market and the government had to step in to stop this trend. Strict censor codes were adopted to discourage films copied from Indian Hindi films.

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Side by side the new wave movement started in the film industry in the eighties. Though the attempt was there for producing quality films, the new wave was started in the eighties by a few young film directors trained by the Film Society, Bangladesh Film Institute and Pune Film Institute of India. This led to quality off-beat circuit. In 1980 Film Society Act was passed in the Parliament to encourage the societies as well as to regulate their activities for constructive work. Production of artistic films were encouraged by the societies and this had some impact on the new cinema movement. But this had little impact on production of commercial cinema. The rural and poor urban population, who form 80 per cent of the audience still depended on the so-called entertaining commercial films.

But the off-beat cinemas have their audience too. Middle class educated audience show their eagerness for quality films when they rush for viewing short films produced by young directors. Since 1984 about a dozen such films have been produced by them. The trend was set by "Agami" (future) by a young Pune Film Institute product Morshadul Islam. Unfortunately, these films do not get release in commercial cinema houses. In the public halls and community centres these are exhibited at private initiative. People queue up to view these products and pay for it. Even in the small towns one has a sizeable audience. The demand for such quality films among the paying middle class, upper middle class and rich audience has shown an upward trend. Incidentally, in the absence of any regular showing of full-length off-beat cinemas this audience had earlier turned to video. The new audience trend has encouraged the young talents to start full-length commercial films.

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Number of Cinemas

As has been stated earlier, since the first film produced in 1956, till June 1987, more than one thousand films have been released and exhibited through the cinema halls. Of these, the production number for the last five years is more than 350 -- averaging about 60 films a year. According to the noted film critic Mr. Alamgir Kabir, who himself is a producer of quality films -- "Despite economic deprivation and investment shyness prevailing in industrial sectors, capital with passionate interest in so-called commercial film production displayed enough investment prowess." But these investors were anxious for quick return "so there is the trend of costume-action and social-action films in production number," he adds.

Government has also financed or gave subsidy for production of a number of films. The intention is to encourage quality films and patronise producers of such films. The number of films produced so far under such patronage is about a dozen.

2. Mechanics and Economics of Distribution

In Bangladesh the distributor almost dominates the market, in most cases even the production. They advance money for 40 to 50 per cent of the productions for the rights of the film for a period of 3 to 10 years. Then there is the distributor-exhibitor collusion. The distributor has the priority right to adjust his own investment in addition to his commission. In collusion with the exhibitor not more than 25 to 30 per cent of the real income is shown to the producer. With this practice very few producers can pay off the distributor's debt. In view of the

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fact that it is a protected market, the 500 and odd cinema houses entirely depend on producers and distributors. The four major exhibition circuits are Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi where 80 per cent of the cinema halls are situated. A film is booked from its production stage, the amount paid in advance depending on the star-casting and commercial potentiality. A cinema house usually offers 50 per cent of the net sales for the first week, 45 per cent for the second, 40 per cent for the third and so on. Smaller houses in rural circuits get their films on fixed rental basis. However, the above arrangement has its flaw as some seats are sold without actually issuing a ticket, thus depriving both the government of its revenue and the distributor of his share. The government has, however, introduced from last year a new system of taxation known as capacity tax. The tax is fixed on the basis of the number of seats and taxes are paid on proportional basis. But this has also led to unfair means and non-payment of tax at all by the exhibitors.

As stated earlier the distributor dominates the whole film industry. There are very few producers who can invest about one to half a million taka (about 30,000/00 to 50,000/00 dollar)-- about 30 to 40 per cent more for colour films -- without the financial support of the distributor.

As for the other economics of cinema production, according to a survey carried out by Sequence magazine 62 per cent of gross takings go to revenue department, 19 per cent to the exhibitor, 17 per cent to the distributor, and merely 2-3 per cent to the producer. With the rise in price of cinema tickets producer's share has further come down while the introduction of so-called capacity tax has encouraged the exhibitors to deprive the Government from its usual share.

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Except for the regular cinema circuits there is no other outlet for the producers and distributors. The only television network owned by the government does not exhibit any local cinema except once a month -- that too, old out-dated films. In fact television is no threat to the industry. Even though the Video exhibition of foreign Indian films have taken away a number cinema audience it is limited to a particular section. In most cases this section of audience in any case would not have gone for viewing local films in a cinema hall. Especially, the quality and quantity of imported Bengali films for video showing are discouraging. The craze for Indian, and to some extent Pakistani films, is there. But that is yet to be a real threat to the local film industry as these are neither imported nor allowed to be shown through regular cinema houses.

Besides the normal circuits, there are some seasonal travelling cinemas the number of which is nominal. On the other hand the off-beat cinemas and their producers are finding their own channel through public library halls, community centres and even private drawing rooms. There is a proposal by the government which is formulating a national film policy, to convert the rural and urban community centres into occasional cinema exhibition halls which will exhibit only "new trend cinemas." This will lead to the creation of new circuit for the off-beat films.

C. Impact of other media

Intrusion of video has little commercial impact on Bangladesh cinema except that artistically and culturally it has an adverse effect. Observing the popularity of Indian Hindi films and to lure the video audience to the cinemas, plagiarism has been wide-scale. Violence, sex, lurid dance sequences and absurdities have been copied to wide range. But this attempt has also its adverse effect. The producers are searching for new money making formula. They are looking for new recipe combining the different themes of different films seen through VCR shows. This has put the producers

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of "good films" to a new challenge. They are trying to overcome the opposition from different quarters both official and non-official. The remedy lies in the exposition of the new talents and channels for their exposures as well as government patronisation, which is fortunately is not lacking.

D. Talent and techniques

There is no dearth of talents or technical facilities considering the fact that about 60 full-length films are produced every year in Bangladesh. The growth of cinema owes much to the Cine Club and Film Society movement in the country. The movement that began in the late sixties has its mark in the production boom and creation of talents. Bangladesh Federation of Film Societies has encouraged exhibition of quality foreign films for the benefit of both viewers and producers and acted as guardians for the new talents. According to one of the pioneers of this movement Mr. Alamgir Kabir this (movement) has helped improving audience taste in particular and creating overall cinematic awareness in general. But the patrons of these movements are sour about the restrictions imposed by the Government and the Censor Board. The Bangladesh Film Societies (Registration and Control) Act 1980 restricted and regulated the activities of the Society. Despite all these barriers the Film Societies organised exhibition of quality films from abroad, holding of seminars and workshops and publication of cinema related books and magazine. They organised film appreciation courses and sent a few young talented boys for training at Pune Film Institute in India.

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It is at the initiative of the Film Societies, Government set up the Film Institute and Archive. Though the first Dhaka Film Institute was established in 1969 with Mr. Alamgir Kabir as the Principal, the training of film makers and artistes in real sense began after independence in 1971. In 1981 the Institute held the first film appreciation course with 68 students. Of them Morshedul Islam with his short film Agami (Future) and Tanveen Mokammel with Hulia (Warrent) have excelled in the field of quality off-beat films. More courses followed. In 1984 the Institute was merged with National Institute of Mass Communication. The new Institute has already organised a number of training programmes on different fields of film-making. Meanwhile at the initiative of Film Societies more than 15 young boys were sent to Pune Film Institute for training mostly in cinematography, editing and sound recording.

The Film Archive established in 1978 plays a major role in the training of talents and holding film appreciation courses. The main objectives of the Archive are (a) to collect and preserve all historic documents and old films, (b) to conduct research, and (c) to educate the audience. Among the major collections are the first Bangla film, artistic and commercially successful films and rare foreign films. The collections, upto May 1987, may be classified as follows: (a) Full-length films-105, negatives-252, News reels-152, (c) Documentary films-540, negatives-21, dupe negatives-19, (d) others-1156, (e) Still photos-6700, (f) books-2198, (g) Scripts-Scenerios-660, (h) Posters-1650, (i) booklets of songs and stories-900, (j) Magazines-4490, (k) festival booklets-320, (l) misc-1550.

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Film Awards

To encourage quality films National Film Award was introduced in 1976. Besides, there are private awards by different film organisations and film magazines.

Bangladesh had been participating in the international film festivals and competitions for the last few years. In 1980 she bagged the first international award at Meinheim in West Germany with "Surye Dighal Bari" (The Aristocrat House). In 1985 "Agami" (Future) received award at New Delhi International Film Festival, in 1986 "Dahan" by Sheikh Neamat Ali was given an award at Carloveni Film Festival. "Bhat De" (Give me Rice) by Amjad Hossain participated at Cannes in 1987. A number of films were shown at Moscow Festival. The progress made by Bangladeshi films during the last five years, both qualitatively and technically, encouraged them to participate in these festivals.

Production Facilities

Major production facilities are available to the producers at the Film Development Corporation (FDC) set up in 1957. In the private sector there are four privately-owned studios, one more is likely to be completed by 1990. But 95 per cent of the films produced each year avail the facilities provided by FDC. It has a built-in capacity for completing 25 feature films in a year. But due to enhanced pressure FDC provides facilities to more than 100 films of which 50-60 films are completed and exhibited. FDC has also financed out of its own fund about 650 films. It has recently put a ceiling on its production to help private studios. The

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facilities provided by FDC are to: (a) give loans to persons or companies for production of films and establishment of studios, (b) make available the the use of studios on hire, (c) do research and prepare schemes for the government for improvement and progress of the film industry, (d) import cinematograph films and other necessary requisites for production and processing of films for film producers, (e) give loans to exhibitors for purchase of equipment. In the Second Five Year Plan (1985-90) Taka 110 million (US \$ 3.5 million) has been provided to modernise the film production. This will increase the production capacity to 70 feature films a year.

FDC now provides the most modern equipment, to mention a few are -- Moviola editing machines, audio mixing console, silver recording system, negative plant and Andre Debie printer. The Zahir Raihan colour laboratory, the latest addition, has contributed to the improvement in the efficiency of the colour film processing.

Export/Import or exchange

Government has totally banned import of any film from the subcontinental countries such as India and Pakistan. This policy has been adopted to give protection to home industry. However, there is some thinking to allow import of a restricted number of Bangla films from India to encourage competition. But the modality has yet to be chalked out. Import of a limited number of English language films are allowed every year. But the importers rarely import quality films. There too commercialism plays the major part. "Kung Fu" type films get the priority over good Hollywood or British films. There has been exchange of films in small scale with socialist countries, espacially Soviet Russia and Czechoslovakia. But the extent of such exchange is quite insignificant.

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There has been no export of Bangladeshi films to any other country. A few Bangla films have been exhibited in the UK and Middle East at the initiative of some private film producers and exhibitors and the viewing was limited to the expatriates. One significant development has been joint production with producers in India and Pakistan. But this is more to hoodwink the authority than for finding out a joint market. In the name of joint production a few popular Indian artistes were cast in Bangla film and vice-versa. As dances and gaudy scenes are not allowed in Pakistan films, the producers there made attempt to side-track the censor introducing these in the guise of joint production. However, the so-called joint production venture of the early eighties is now waning.

Overall situation

It can be generally said that the film industry in Bangladesh is thriving -- quantitatively, if not qualitatively. In the protected market, with no real threat from Television or video, commercialism is the main consideration of the producers. During the last five years number of production has gone up by 25 to 30 per cent, number of cinema houses has increased and equipment and facilities available are quite satisfactory with continuous modernisation.

At the request of the film producers, exhibitors and film societies government is formulating a National Film Policy. A national committee is working on this. Their terms of reference will include review of the censor policy, subsidy for film making, encourage production of quality films and films for children etc.

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Acknowledgements:

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(b) *Bangladesh Chalachitrer Itihash*
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(c) Bangladesh Film Archive

(d) Mr. Alamgir Kabir, Producer,
Director and Critic

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