

Bangladeshi movies at the Oscars?

SHAFQUAT ZAMAN KHAN

FOR as long as I can remember, I have always dreamt that one day a Bangladeshi would be able to produce a film which would make a profound impact at the Oscars.

Now, one can argue that the Oscars may not be the most appropriate benchmark to judge a Bangladeshi movie due to its pro-Western views, but it is perhaps the most-viewed and celebrated awards show in the world. And if something catches the attention of Oscar honchos, it is certainly highlighted all over the world.

Today, there are many young creative Bangladeshis who are actively involved in making Bengali short films that are proving to be quite popular while maintaining a certain standard. This is a very positive sign. Bengali music also has reached a new level of popularity in recent days, thanks to the talent hunts and brilliant upcoming musicians. Our mainstream films need to reach that level of popularity as well.

Through improved editing, creative cinematography, sharp sound, and most importantly, fierce salesmanship and marketing strategies, our movie industry can get a much-needed boost.

Bollywood was not that far off from our films back in the day. But today, they have successfully placed themselves all over the world. All over the world, even people outside the Indian subcontinent are now taking an interest in Bollywood movies.

We cannot compete with Bollywood; it's the largest movie producing industry in the world, and we don't want to either. Bangladeshi film industry has been, for a long time now, going through a slump. But no one can deny that our filmmakers have made some exceptionally good movies. Zahir Raihan's *Jibon Thekey Neya*, Humayun Ahmed's *Nondito Norokey*, *Shongkhoncel Karagar* and *Shyamol Chhaya*, Tareque and Catherine Masud's *Matir Moyna* are indeed films that we are all proud of.

These movies need to be digitally re-mastered with accurate English subtitles. They should have millions of legal copies, and should be sold all over the world with the right kind of publicity. Every nation has a keen audience for foreign films. Films depicting Bangladeshi culture and history will definitely find an audience who are eager to know about us and our heritage.

The movie *Gandhi* created a buzz and won several Academy Awards in 1982 and because of that movie people from all over the world had an accurate impression of who Gandhi was and how he led India to freedom. The Western world knows about the atrocities committed against the Protestants by the Catholics during The Spanish Inquisition, or against the Russians by the Germans during World War II, mass murder of Jews by the Nazis during the Holocaust, against the people of Vietnam by the Americans, and so on. Unspeakable carnage was carried out against our people by one of the most brutal and well-equipped military forces in human history, yet the whole world is not aware of the authentic history of the Liberation War.

As emphasized earlier, our movies lack proper marketing, accurate subtitles while some just depict fragments of an event of epic proportions. A movie should be made with befitting graphics when necessary and should be true to life if they attempt to delineate great historical figures. Precise depiction of political personalities who were part of our history, starting from Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq, Husseyin Shaheed Suhrawardy, Ayub Khan, Maulana Bhashani, Yahya Khan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Bangobandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and Ziaur Rahman are also a must.

Bangladesh is a country with a rich heritage and a history often entangled with turbulence. When we attained independence in 1971, we started with nothing, thanks to the Pakistani Army for burning everything into ashes! From that low point, we have come quite a long way as a nation in the past 35 years. We have innumerable internal problems but so does every country in the world.

Bangladesh has immense potentials. The world needs to see that. Through a dynamic, well-made movie with proper historical facts and accurate subtitles in all the major languages -- English, French, German, Chinese, Spanish, and Arabic -- our stories too can create sensation in the global movie circuit.

It would make me extremely proud as a Bangladeshi (and I'm sure my fellow countrymen would feel the same way) when non-Bangladeshis in far-off countries would flock to the theatres to watch a Bengali movie.

RAMADAN PRICE SPIRAL Government action too little, too late

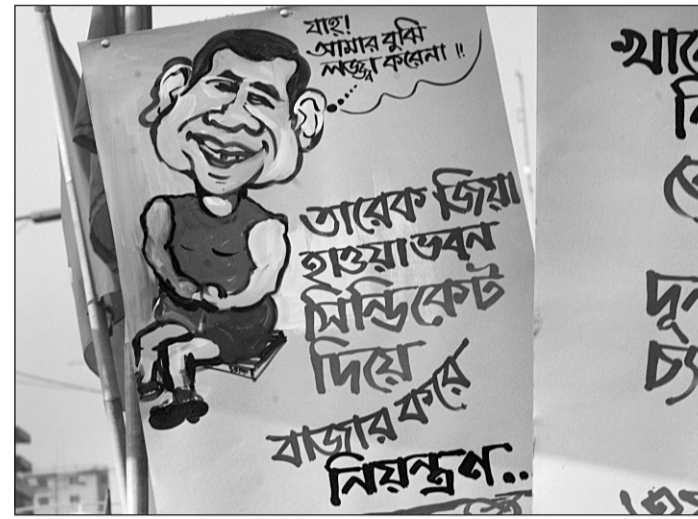
The PMO's involvement in combating prices was not well advised. It would not make any difference but only would demonstrate ineffectiveness of the highest office. The consumers will continue to suffer from price spiral during the month of Ramadan and the rest of the tenure of the present government. The inclement weather has making a bad situation even worse. Whatever actions the government has taken so far seem to be too little, too late.



somehow different views. They blame government failure to streamline the supply chains, which is frustrating its efforts to cool the prices. For example the prices of potatoes is on the rise. In a week in the kitchen markets prices increased from Tk. 18.00 to Tk. 20.00 per kilogram, registering an increase of over 120 percent in a year.

Several factors contributed to the unprecedented rise in prices during the tenure of the present government. In two articles on price spiral that appeared in The Daily Star on May 22 and August 18, I tried to highlight them. The main reasons are fall or near stagnation in production of rice, wheat, pulses, oil seed, sugarcane, jute, etc; depreciation in the value of the taka; rise of importers' syndicate with close nexus with a powerful quarter within the government; all-pervasive corruption and toll collection, rise in transportation costs, etc.

Prudent policies as well as administrative measures are needed to combat the situation. However, the government appears to be concentrating on administrative measures mainly to bring the prices down. The measures like selling of rice through OMS dealers or other essential items by TCB, BADC, BFDC, and BDR at several points in the city may give respite to some consumers temporarily, but they are unlikely to have any impact on overall price spiral.



The government embarked on distributing over 100,000 tons of rice through about 10,000 OMS dealers throughout the country. TCB and other governmental agencies have also started selling some essential items from trucks at different points of the metropolis at reduced prices.

The personnel of intelligence and law enforcement agencies started visiting wholesale and retail markets. If their visits deter the toll collectors from visiting the markets there would be reduction in cost of doing business and might have positive impacts on prices. However, in a recent seminar in the FBCI the business leaders alleged that to bear the "Eidi" payable to law enforcement and other governmental agencies the traders are left with no choice but to increase the prices during the Ramadan by a few percentage points.

GHULAM RAHMAN

THE Prime Minister's Office (PMO) has stepped in for combating the price spiral in the aftermath of the commerce minister washing his hands of his responsibility. Principal Secretary Dr. Kamal Siddique presided over a meeting of top bureaucrats of Commerce, Finance, NBR, Home, and others, and adopted a set of recommendations to cool the prices during Ramadan.

The PMO directed several initiatives which include reduction of duties and taxes, import by TCB, punitive actions against importers' syndicates, display of price lists at the retail markets by the city corporations, selling of some essential items at different city points by TCB and other governmental agencies including BDR, vigilance by intelligence and law enforcement agencies, close monitoring of market prices, etc.

The involvement of PMO in regulating the prices, apparently, has gone unheeded. The private TV channels have been airing market reviews which show that while the buyers were very much dismayed at the prevailing price level the shopkeepers predicting further rise in the coming days.

Against this backdrop on September 13, Khandaker Shahidul Islam, (secretary, PMO) called and presided over a meeting which was attended by high officials from different ministries and organizations including Chittagong Port and Bangladesh Bank. The port authority informed the meeting that huge number of containers is lying at its yards containing essential items for clearance. BB, reportedly, has also presented a very rosy picture of the supply side.

The consumer right activists and market analysts, however, hold

KAZI SM KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

MARTIAL law has only a short-lived honeymoon. It fails to woo people permanently. These sentences by an ex-Brigadier (Brig. Beg in a recent Daily Star piece "Redeeming a Nation") have really caught my fancy, not only for their eloquence, but also for their sheer relevance, more so against the backdrop of the military take-over in Thailand. Being carried away by the Thailand developments, a few people have already started to talk of such a development in Bangladesh.

For those foolish people who have gone rather effusive regarding such a development, the statement of an ex-military man can well be an eye-opener. Admittedly, no military government can redress the grievances to the satisfaction of the majority of the people. Martial law aggravates the situation further, and corruption is practiced all the more avidly, though it usurps power in the name of uprooting corruption.

Arguably, Bangladesh's long-standing experience with military

Short-lived honeymoons

There is no alternative to democracy. For the real betterment of the country, a military take-over will definitely be the worst thing to happen. After 1991, we noticed the meteoric rise of the media in Bangladesh because of which we were able to know what happening was. The role of the media and the civil society was definitely one of facilitation and cooperation in the functioning of the state. Media activity has, most of the times, proved useful in unearthing the cases of militancy, adulteration, human rights violation, and so on.

It is perhaps too early to state that the next elected government will be able to bring halcyon days. But, at the fag end of the tenure of the current coalition government, it is perhaps more pertinent to ponder on what damages have been wrought on our body politic by the current regime.

Admittedly, the wounds have festered to an intolerable extent, but the government is little interested in even providing some last-minute relief to the people. The current coalition has been so preoccupied with the thought of coming back to power that it just can't spare a thought for the people's miseries, even at this dying moment of its tenure. It seems that the coalition cares a fig for people's reprisal in the voting, which is not unlikely.

State power is nothing but command over the exchequer and people's pockets. Being imbued with the preceding motto, the bigwigs and the petty bourgeoisie related to the current regime have looted public money at their will. The businessmen who had access to the corridors of power had a meaty share of the booty, while the peripheral middlemen and rent-seekers were direct beneficiaries, leaving the local level leaders to enjoy whatever trickled down.

May I, however, humbly ask whether I have been too harsh on the current regime in pointing out its tendencies? In fact, many others have done so earlier, and rightly so. Admittedly, people do not understand the esoteric theories of economics. However, many have working knowledge of inflation, increase of price of commodi-

ties in the world market, and its impact on the local market.

In simple terms, inflation implies a situation where the amount of money in circulation is much more than the commodities available in the market. Now, the pertinent question is not one of non-availability of commodities, which are reported to be abundant, but rather of over-circulation of money. Many claim that there is no scarcity of essentials, but the prices are just shooting up only to feed the criminal syndicates.

Anyway, uncertainty regarding electoral reforms is still hovering on the horizon. The major political parties seem to be more interested in time-wasting and playing the blame game. The last session of the parliament is about to end. If any reform is carried out, constitutional amendment will be required.

Another black chapter in Pakistan's history?

The first and the foremost thing that Musharraf may have to do is to accept the basic demand of the Baluchis for autonomy, making them equal partners in the administration. If the current deteriorating political situation in Baluchistan can be halted and amicably solved, then only Baluchistan can be an active partner in Pakistan's national politics.

deprived of the benefits of the natural wealth, like coal, oil, and particularly gas found at Sui in Waziristan. Sui gas was lifted and supplied to other areas of the country.

It was a big source of income for the government, dominated mainly by the Punjab province and its mighty army. The same tragedy happened with the poor East Bengalis who produced the golden fibre, jute, which had earned billions of dollars in foreign exchange, but the producers were literally deprived by the central government of their share.

Bugti's killing has been described by Pakistani and foreign analysts as a "blunder" and a "disaster," that is likely to "radicalise the insurgency" in the region. His death would undoubtedly create more problems than it solved for Musharraf. The killing has turned Bugti into a "martyr" and will serve as a source of inspi-

ration and strength to the rising young Baluchis who idolised him. It may be recalled here that tribal leaders had enjoyed their hey-day during the British period which allowed them, under an unwritten law based on mutual understanding, to have their own way of running their local administration, including trial of criminals by "Jirga." Akbar Bugti was a well-placed and respected leader in the tradition, not only for his own tribesmen but also to the tribesmen of neighbouring provinces. He was a well accepted overlord for all purposes. His only "crime" was that he used to receive a "royalty" from the Pakistan Petroleum Ltd (PPL), a central government-sponsored organisation, which was fully authorised to lift and distribute gas from Sui in Waziristan. Reportedly the raping of a lady doctor attached with Sui Centre ignited the fire that is now spreading wildly following the killing of Bugti.

War on terror? The killing of Bugti was perhaps part of Pakistan's "war on terror" game that Musharraf had been playing with some eighty thousand soldiers stationed in the tribal areas to fight al-Qaida and Taliban terrorists on the Afghan border. It may bring more laurels for him from Washington to help him get through another term as Pakistan's president from 2007. America wants a reliable man like Musharraf in the region. But the point is whether Musharraf will succeed in quelling the rising turmoil in Baluchistan. The unrest is now being described as the work of some "miscreants" working with external assistance.

Pakistan seems to have learnt nothing from the hard lesson of the past. Perhaps Pakistani leaders are going to commit another blunder in its history. Baluchistan's sad stories of deprivation and exploitation by the ruling junta are just

making; people are not happy with his pro-US "war on terror" policy. Baluch demands Therefore, to avoid any catastrophe bringing a tragic and disastrous end, Gen. Musharraf will have to be more cautious about using force, whatever his military intelligence advises him. He should remember that army action against a national movement may bring only temporary gain but no permanent solution. Hence, he will have to sit with the people representing the new-nationalist Baluchis belonging to the younger generation, and not with mere "show-men."

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The author is a former Secretary to the government.

They also serve

ZAHID ABDULLAH

THE World Health Organization puts the number of disabled people in Pakistan at around 10 per cent of the total population while the government's estimate is far lower -- three per cent of the population. What accounts for the difference between the WHO and the official figures?

The figures given by the government is vehemently contested by the disability rights organization. Even if the margin of error is only that of one per cent on the part of the government, it means that it denies the fact that there are potentially 150,000 people with disabilities.

Discrepancy between these figures demonstrates that people with disabilities are mostly "nameless, faceless and uncared persons in Pakistan." Who are these people? Where and how do they live? These are valid questions because they are not represented in the mainstream national life in accordance with their corresponding share in the overall population of the country. More importantly, looking beyond cold statistics, how can these people be given names and faces and brought into the mainstream national life?

Technology is a great leveller. As you read these lines, rest assured that the thoughts contained in them have been articulated, typed, and sent to the editor by a blind person. This proves beyond any shadow of a doubt that visually impaired can join the mainstream national life provided that they have access to sensory substitution technologies.

The questions that arise are: "What are these technologies? How could they be made available to the blind population of our country? How can they also join the work force and work towards the country's progress with their sighted counterparts?"

These technologies primarily refer to those products and devices that try to replace sight with speech, sound and touch. They are a complete departure from sensory augmentation technologies that try to enhance whatever sight is available. The cheap laptop, PC, scanner, OCR software, graphics software and sound card provide a firm base on which the visually impaired person is able to build a complete kit of sensory substitution facilities. Of these, perhaps the most powerful and most effective is the screen reader like "Window Eyes" and "Jaws" that have profoundly influenced the lives of the visually challenged. Through a speech synthesizer, a screen reader gives voice output and the visually challenged can access the computer very effectively.

What is the government's role in making this technology available to the visually impaired? What policy initiatives have been undertaken to create a conducive environment so that this technology could play its optimum role in improving blind people's access to information? So far, only half-hearted measures have been taken to make this technology available and that too in a few selected schools for the blind.

A growing number of disabled people in Pakistan are using screen-reading software in order to have access to information on the Internet. However, technology alone cannot guarantee full access to information, for it can only yield desired results when complimented with relevant standards. These standards pertain to those technical details while designing a web page or displaying or putting information on web site that cater to special needs of people with different disabilities. Comprehensive information, tools and training to make Internet accessible can be obtained from the Web Accessibility Initiative web site at <http://www.w3.org/WAI/>.

Many countries have framed necessary laws and standards to give equal access to their citizens with disabilities. In Pakistan, however, in the absence of a web accessibility policy, almost all official websites are inaccessible, in varying degrees, to the disabled people.

Only by framing comprehensive web accessibility policy and enactment of relevant laws can this digital divide be bridged. Through such a policy, the government should make it binding on all private sector institutions and organizations to make their websites accessible. Since, one of the initiatives of the present government is to have "paperless government," therefore, it is all the more important that it puts in place web accessibility standards so that disabled people have equal access to information.

Access to information is one of the key determinants of well-being of any group of people and it is through equal access to information that the state can provide equal opportunity environment to the disabled citizens.

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