

Anti-culture Films: A Question of Daring

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia on Friday gave away the 1991 film awards of the Bangladesh Film Producers Association. She advised the movie-makers to go more for films depicting the life of the people. That implied a counsel that the dream merchants of the nation should go less for churning out the stuff they have been busy at for decades. Perhaps saying as such would both have been indiscreet and rather out of place — after all she was there to give a kind of well-done pat on the back of the producers rather than taking them to task.

What indeed can a government do to move the movie-makers to care for social relevance and artistic excellence in their products excepting for dishing out the best words in the books on such occasions as Fridays? The censor board is there to exercise films of things that the ruling administration has taboos against. And after all almost all in any composition of this ungainly gathering of questionable people have very little to do with films — and those that have are most times the culprits themselves. Censor boards neither pay nor promote and have in fact no power on the films in the matter of channelising these on to healthier lives. Films in Bangladesh or for that matter anywhere in the world wouldn't have been the better or worse for all such boards to be hanged at a time. We, for one, wouldn't like an overassertive censor board to be meddling with artistic productions in their infinite philistinism. So out are the censors as an instrument of righting the film situation.

The idea of awards by way of rewarding good film-making and discouraging the others — experience says — has fallen flat on its face. Films haven't improved by even a centimetre in spite of awards galore.

That our films should change, wholesale and radically, is an imperative of the first order because most of these — the whole trend and tenor of it — are cutting at the root of our national culture in a manner shaming even the BTV and the sleazy porn magazines. The much-maligned jatra is a paradise compared to this anticulture abys of vulgarity and unreality. This cannot be allowed to continue. The entrenched coteries in the film industry have over the years evolved themselves into a system of vicious machinery in which producers, distributors and exhibitors fall into slots so nicely as to preclude any chance of a wind of change to blow over it. They have by their wonderful device driven out all discerning and discriminating spectators of taste and culture out of the movie houses.

Film in Bangladesh is wholly in the hands of investors who care only for the return of their money and are always unsure of a profit. This nervous lot do not dare harbour and nurture talent in any of the many aspects of the film — let alone dreamers and visionaries. The government has so far, failing to do any good turn to the films and their makers, been doing immense harm to both the films and the national culture as also to the investors by playing up to the producers' tune of protecting a 40-year old child against foreign imports — even if those be controlled to belong to class. The results of a suicidal protection we have seen for three decades. It is time aesthetically controlled unprotection was given a chance to prove its power to change things for better.

The Prime Minister's film function came at a time when hundreds of true film enthusiasts — many of them with proven filmic prowess — were holding at another venue the third International Short Film Festival featuring 124 entries from all over the globe. Why can't the government float a film finance corporation in the style our great neighbour did to enable the deserving among these film dreamers to do things that would help ease the stranglehold on films by quarters who are themselves none too happy with the situation?

The government needs to dare. Can it?

US and Bosnia

A firm indication from Washington that the Clinton Administration would give the highest priority to the situation in Bosnia will be welcomed by the international community and, most of all, by the tens of thousand people, especially Muslims and Croats, who are caught in the cross-fire. The indication came on Friday soon after Serb warplanes had blasted the Bosnian position a day after a ceasefire had been established between Croats and Muslims. Sadly enough, the suspension of hostility between the two ethnic groups which had once been allies, has not lasted even days. It is an utterly hopeless situation which can be set right only by a strong action on the part of Washington.

It is no longer a question of just putting an end to the fighting among various groups and ensuring some kind of stability to the war-torn former Yugoslavia. A report by the Amnesty International (AI), just released to the press, reveals that abuse of women, including rape, has become a weapon used against the victims. The AI blames all the warring factions for this situation, but refers to Muslim women as being the worst victims. It is a frightening situation that can be compared to what happened in Nazi-occupied Europe during the Second World War. President Clinton whose commitment to human right is yet to be tested must regard the Bosnian crisis, as outlined in the AI report, as a challenge to his conscience.

The United States is right in calling upon European nations to be "more forceful" in tackling the Bosnian conflict. These countries may have all kinds of reasons — or excuses — for dragging their feet in taking a firm line on a situation in which political and humanitarian considerations have clearly merged. But, in our view, no reasons are strong enough to let some 18,000 people die, countless women suffer indignities and so many go through the so-called process of ethnic cleansing that Clinton has vowed to "nip in the bud."

The failure of the European nations to take a determined position against the Serbs or that of the UN Secretary General Boutros Ghali to offer a firm plan of action for ending the immense suffering of oppressed people of Bosnia places a heavy burden on the new administration in Washington. Here is a chance for Clinton to demonstrate that, all said and done, the United States remains far ahead of its European partners in meeting challenges, not necessarily for its own political gains. After Somalia, here is a new opportunity for Washington to earn the gratitude of the suffering Muslims and Croats in Bosnia.

I was deeply moved by a picture printed by the International Herald Tribune of January 9-10, 1993. The picture showed President-elect Bill Clinton with four ex-secretaries of state of the United States in a meeting in Little Rock. Three out of the four served under Republican presidents. William P Rogers was secretary of state in the administration of Richard Nixon and Alexander M Haig Jr in that of Ronald Reagan. Mr George P Shultz served under Mr Bush. The Democrat was Edmund S Muskie who served in the cabinet of Jimmy Carter. These four senior diplomats were seen in a pleasant mood talking with the young president-elect giving him advice on broad foreign policy matters. They all expressed the view that Mr Clinton had picked up a "solid foreign policy team" and that this should help Mr Clinton in making up for his lack of experience in foreign affairs.

I was moved by this beautiful picture because it symbolized, at least for me, the spirit of democracy in the United States of America. At election times Americans can fight a tough and even a rough battle along party lines as we all saw in the CNN in the last election. But the business of running the government of the country is a sacred national responsibility and in this task it is the American people who are to be served and not the supporters of the victorious party. In fact, in all the western democracies the party recedes to the background after the election. The party which lost the election is not the "defeated forces" but partner in a system of government. The five men, according to the report, were talking about American interests in the field of foreign relations. The experience of the former

secretaries of state is a national asset at the disposal of the new administration. The President-elect, for his part, is not averse to listening to these veterans of diplomacy just because they belonged to the "defeated" political party. In fact, Americans would not perhaps even understand why there should be such a hostile attitude towards these distinguished men. This only shows how far we are, as a nation, from absorbing the spirit of democracy. We take a lot of pride in restoring democracy by toppling an autocrat but there is no room for complacency. We have a long journey ahead of us before we will be able to run a truly democratic government.

Let me refer to a report published by The Daily Star of January 7 to illustrate the point that I am trying to make today. According to UNB, the Prime Minister lashed out at the opposition saying that 'the defeated political forces are out to disrupt the development efforts of the government.' This is a serious allegation. Referring to the opposition parties as the 'defeated forces' does not reflect the spirit of democracy. It shows the arrogance of power but what is even worse, it shows a lack of understanding of the principles on which the parliamentary system works. Such statements generate tension and bad blood and a mood of hostility in the political field which is not congenial for running the government smoothly.

Let me also refer to another news item, this one from a Bengali language daily Bhorer Kagan of 7 January. According to the reporter Ibrahim Chowdhury Khokan, the Prime Minister said that the people of Sylhet had made a mistake in casting their vote in the last election to the Parliament. Now they had, she said, understood their mistake. She called upon them to stay with the current. The reporter added that the Prime Minister remained silent on many of the long standing grievances of the people of the area. There was no attempt to hide the fact

that the Prime Minister's refusal to consider these local problems sympathetically was linked with the manner in which the people had voted in the last election. The Finance Minister who also accompanied the Prime Minister and spoke at the meeting, was even more candid in saying that it was because of their voting record that the allocation of funds for Sylhet faced questions in the cabinet. The local people, according to some reports, resented these remarks. This was a barely concealed attempt at intimidation of the electorate.

ON THE RECORD by Shah AMS Kibria

Is this how we practice democracy? The electoral constituencies which did not vote for the BNP candidates are to be punished by the government and that too in open declarations in public meetings. Did we fight the autocratic regime for this type of politics of revenge? Dangling the carrot, the people of the area are being asked to fall in line in support of the ruling party. Neither the Prime Minister nor the Finance Minister were too subtle in holding out the stick if they did not behave while voting next time. I wonder if this is a matter in which the Election Commission should take a look. I am, of course, aware of attempts by politicians to manipulate the allocation of funds to favour their particular area. But what I have quoted above is far beyond what one would even imagine in a democratic system. Such an attitude can destroy the parliamentary system if electors are told that they can get allocation of development funds only if they vote for the ruling party.

I wrote earlier about the need for what is called "bipartisan policy" on certain national issues. While political parties are expected to have their own party programmes and priorities on social, economic and other domestic issues, there is often need for consensus on a number of issues of fundamental national interest. Basic framework of economic policy, to my mind, is one such question. External relation is another subject on which most countries seek to

establish national consensus in order to achieve the national goal. There cannot be two opinions on the imperatives of safeguarding the independence and territorial integrity of the state. During the cold war the Americans fought communism on a bipartisan basis. In other words, the political parties were united in their perception of the threat from this political system and had no difficulty in cooperating with one another in the nation's interest. This also ensured continuity of policy. The change of government including change from one party to the other did not mean any significant change in the nation's strategy to face its common threat. Most other democratic countries try to achieve such consensus when the circumstances so warrant. What about Bangladesh? The major political parties, during the anti-Ershad movement, agreed on a blue print incorporating some basic issues on which they had a broad measure of agreement. A consensus of this nature was very valuable for the nation. Regrettably some of the agreed items on the agenda have been cast aside by the government and an excellent opportunity to work unitedly on certain issues of common concern was lost. Instead, we find the government and the opposition are engaged in a verbal exchange almost on all issues—big and small. The opposition certainly has a big responsibility and unless it is responsible and restrained in its criticism of the government its credibility will be lost. But it is the government which is in

the driver's seat and the initiative for maintaining a dialogue and a spirit of cooperation rests with the government. The use of expressions such as "defeated forces" in referring to the opposition party seems very puzzling to me. Only wars lead to the defeat of one side and victory for the other. We certainly had a war and that was the Liberation War. The entire Bengali nation came out victorious in the historic war. Only those elements who opposed the independence of Bangladesh may, therefore, be termed as 'defeated forces'. It is indeed most curious that the BNP leaders love to use this particular expression in referring to the Awami League. But who won more votes in the last election? It was the Awami League. If we had the proportional system of representation it is the Awami League which would have got more seats in the Parliament. The BNP ought not to forget that not only did they get fewer popular votes than the Awami League but its candidates forfeited deposit money in 59 constituencies whereas the Awami League lost only 5. These facts should sober them down so that we have the right spirit in the political arena. Tolerance and respect for other's opinion is the essence of democracy. Intimidating the electorate and punishing them for voting against the ruling party is the negation of the spirit of democracy. It would be a good thing if all our political leaders reflect on this point and try to bring a constructive spirit in the political dialogue. It would be tragic if people have to resort to mass movements to restore democracy every time the rulers forget the rules of the game.

Water Crisis Underscores Arab-Israeli Settlement

Mounir B Abboud writes from Beirut

Although seldom mentioned, control over water is a crucial question that underlies Arab-Israeli conflict

THEIR decades-long feud notwithstanding, a new conflict between Arab states and Israel over water resources is heightening tension in the Middle East. So much so that experts believe water will eventually determine the future of the region and will have to be part of any Arab-Israeli settlement. Indeed, although seldom mentioned, the control over water is a crucial question that underlies Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some observers even believe the determination of Israel to retain full control over water resources in the Occupied Territories is a hidden reason for their intransigence about withdrawing from the West Bank they seized in 1967.

The Middle East stands at the precipice of another water crisis," says a report by the Washington, DC-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies. "Before the 21st century, the struggle over limited and threatened water resources could under already fragile ties among regional states and lead to unprecedented upheaval in the area."

Hasham Zarour and Jad Isaac of Jerusalem's Applied Research Institute say the Middle East is facing "a potentially severe water crisis that will certainly have a long-term impact on the geopolitical map of the area." They say the situation is already critical in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and threatened the agricultural sector which forms the backbone of the local Palestinian economy. They point out that water will

be a key issue in any Arab-Israeli settlement and warn the crisis must be faced now. Israel's reported diversion of the Jordan and Yarmouk rivers as well as the Litani river in southern Lebanon has sent shock waves across the Arab world. Some Arab leaders even called for a combined action to confront the new Israeli threat. What is alarming for Arab states is the diversion of Arab waters linked to Israeli plans to resettle thousands of Soviet Jewish immigrants in occupied Arab territories. Arab leaders are worried the migration might move Israel to annex parts of occupied land to accommodate the newcomers, threatening the Palestinian hope for an independent state on the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The present drought exacerbates the issue. Israel and neighbouring Arab countries are suffering from one of the driest years in modern history. This year follows four years of drought and declining water reserves. The Sea of Galilee is at the lowest recorded level in modern times and aquifers elsewhere are also depleted. Indeed, the Sea of Galilee and underground aquifers have been so depleted to the extent that the intrusion of waste water, sewage and salt water (in coastal areas) is a growing problem. Some water experts warn that these intrusions may well be irreversible. Israel's rapidly expanding population is placing new demands on water supply. However, this only partially accounts for the acute water shortage. For example, the

purchase of Israeli produce. The rationalisation of Israeli agriculture to make it consistent with semidesert conditions could at least be partially accomplished by the removal of government subsidies. But the political obstacles to such a step are, however, almost insurmountable: the Water Committee in the Knesset, for example, is composed of members of the Farming Committee. For Palestinians the drought, coming after years of discriminatory water restrictions, is an unmitigated disaster. Israeli Jews are permitted to drill wells to any depth, but few Palestinians are allowed to drill any wells, even shallow ones. The deeper wells drilled by the Israelis have lowered the level of water in the underground aquifers, causing many of the surface springs and shallow wells used by Palestinians to run dry. The effect of the drought thus bears heavily on Palestinian villages not connected to the national water system. Glaring examples of political discrimination are the water subsidies that the national water system makes available only to Jewish farmers. Palestinian agriculture long suffered from this form of economic discrimination, which predates the current drought. This is only one facet of fact that water in the Occupied

Territories is totally under the control of the occupiers who restrict access to Palestinians and divert into Israel as much water as they please without consulting the Palestinians. Fewer than 150,000 Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank, for example, are allowed to consume more water than all the one million Palestinian in the area. Since Israel's establishment 44 years ago, its water consumption has risen steadily. Now 85 per cent of the water in occupied areas is taken by Israel to meet around a quarter of the country's overall water demand. There is a clear inequality in water distribution. Annual domestic water consumption

is estimated at 15 cubic metres per head in Arab villages, 35 cu m in Arab towns and 90 cu m in Jewish settlements. Only 6 per cent of Arab farmland in the West Bank is irrigated, compared with 70 per cent of land cultivated by Jewish settlers. This is reflected in the total annual water consumption, with Palestinians using from 107 to 157 cu m each, Israelis 365 cu m, and settlers 640 to 1,480 cu m. Palestinian farmers also pay six times as much for their water and face restrictions on drilling and the use of wells. Indeed, they have no say in planning or developing water resources and supplies. —Depthnews Asia

OPINION Baghdad and Bosnia: a Tale of Two Cities

Khurram Malik Wednesday the 13th of January, allied aircraft from USS carrier Kitty Hawk stationed in the Persian Gulf take off on bombing sorties, their target the Iraqi missile installations within the Iraqi side of the 32nd parallel. The fighter bombers destroy the seemingly threatening mobile missiles resulting in many civilian casualties. Later, appearing on television, the guardians of world peace, US President George Bush, British Prime Minister John Major and host of ambassadors, politicians in elegant suits and generals in battle dress irrevocably express, in uncompromising terms, that Iraq must comply with the UN resolutions or face further military action. A normal mortal watching this disturbing world scenario would expect and hope that the same allied military might which shattered the Iraqi military machinery to rubble and was now engaged in humiliating its sovereignty and territorial borders, would speak the same language and act forcefully in the same proportion against the backdrop of butchery and atrocities now going on in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Whilst the genocide of Bosnian Muslims at the hands of the Serbs, under a new political term 'ethnic cleansing' goes unabated, mass rape of Muslim women by the Serb soldiers, and their forced captivity till such time as they give birth to the bastard child, is daily reported in all the world media the elegant western leaders, their ambassadors and generals speak in couched language like 'we are considering the various options,' 'unless we are sure where we are getting into, military intervention is not the answer' or that, 'we may consider monitoring the no fly zone over Bosnia and so forth and so on. The allied forces were quick and decisive to drive out the Iraqis from their occupation of Kuwait, but encouraged the Israeli occupation of Palestine and their illegal deportation of 50,000 Palestinians from their homes and hearths in 1948, degrading them to that of squatters

living on the horizon of the West Bank and Gaza strip. Recently, the United States was actively considering listing Pakistan as a terrorist state for its alleged support to Kashmiri militants and supporting the insurgency. However, the demolition of Babri mosque at Ayodhya by Hindu zealots and extremists and the subsequent communal killings of the Indian Muslims is considered an internal affair by the guardians of world peace. So where does this lead us to believe. Today international politics and diplomacy has to be interpreted and painfully swallowed in the light of its inbuilt hypocrisy, discrimination and dual standard. Perhaps the Muslims the world over are too naive to believe that justice and fairplay would prevail in a situation where vested interests, influential lobbies and unjust discriminations are at interplay with one another. Unknowingly, the radical Muslims would like to believe they are still fighting medieval battles with swords and shields. The frequent call for Jihad, (holy war) and the rest indicate that. The crusade in the middle ages between the Christians and the Muslims were fought with weapons which were proportionately balanced on the two sides. The present conditions totally outweighs the balance of power. No country now or in the foreseeable future can hope to match the military sophistry and technology of the West. Like the once invincible Roman Empire, their downfall would be their own inner decadence. Attempting to be a regional military power can end in disaster. In Second World War, Japan wanted hegemony over south, south-east Asia and Germany in Europe. Both ended in Fiasco, with death and destruction to their social and economic infrastructures. Perhaps the most important lesson the two countries learned was to divert their resources for the general well being of their people while helping the self defence to be strong.

To the Editor...

Price of rice, paddy Sir, Agriculture is the mainstay of our economy. The economic condition of a particular year of the country largely depends upon the agricultural output of the same year. In many cases it is an indicator of the economy. Many times the prices and wages are fixed on the basis of price of rice and paddy. Due to a bumper crop last year, the price of paddy and rice has gone down. In northern districts the price of course rice has gone down to Tk. 7 and Tk. 8 per KG. In many parts of the country, people sell their labour in exchange of rice and paddy. Many of the Labourers prefer accepting rice/paddy to cash.

Due to low price of rice and paddy the labourers are facing problem in buying other goods and necessities, because the price of other goods and necessities have not fallen down in terms of the price of rice and paddy. The rate of services like tuition fees, rickshaw fare, train fare etc. has not gone down in terms of lowering down of price of rice and paddy.

On the other hand, affluent farmers are also thinking to switch over to other cultivations as they are not getting price as per fund investment in the paddy cultivation. The price of fertilizer is already on the high side. Since cultivation of paddy is very much related to all aspects of our life, we should think over the issue very carefully and fix up a price which is beneficial to all producers and consumers. Mahbul Haque Chowdhury DGM, Sonali Bank, HO, Dhaka

the high side. Since cultivation of paddy is very much related to all aspects of our life, we should think over the issue very carefully and fix up a price which is beneficial to all producers and consumers. Mahbul Haque Chowdhury DGM, Sonali Bank, HO, Dhaka

Zone-1 (WASA) has so far issued four Ultimatums dated 17.3.92, 1.6.92, 29.7.92 and 24.10.92, not one ultimatum on October 24, 1992 as stated by the PIO. Dhaka WASA asking us to pay the impugned arrears bills amounting to over one lakh Taka, refusal of which by us meant disconnection of water line attachment of property, certificate case etc for us. However, the ultimatums were contained when I submitted a written statement to the Revenue Officer (Zone-1) explaining the situation that would eventually force us to go to court against him for remedial measures.

I have no Asahi meter, as the PIO (WASA) claims, at our premises. The brand name of our meter is Liberty. So his contention that I was well explained about my Asahi meter by the Executive Engineer from the Meter Department does not hold good, for there is a great deal of difference between the two. The unit capacity of Liberty meter is 5 litre and that of Asahi meter 5/8 gallon. I again like to remind the Authority that the unit capacity of our meter is 5 litre to take full count of the meter, all the units of the meter should be multiplied by 5 (the exact capacity of each unit). This is a simple mathematics. There is no doubt or confusion about it. But Dhaka WASA does not follow this easy formula of meters counting. Instead of multiplying the units by 5, Dhaka WASA multiplies them by 10; as a result the whole figure changes into twice the usual one and that leads to increasing the bill two-fold. That is how perhaps the Authority collects double bills from its subscribers. The Public Information Officer (Dhaka WASA), in spite of being aware of the working system of the meter, has said nothing in reply to my letter about the principles that guide the working of water meter. So it proves beyond doubt that the Authority has chosen with intent to conceal from its subscribers the real process of the billing system, thereby preventing them from peeping into the mysteries of Dhaka WASA. In view of the above, I urge our Dhaka WASA to clarify the issue by clearly narrating the principles that guide the workings of the water meter in relation to its unit capacity. M K Nabi Suwambagh Road, Dhaka