

## FILM REVIEW

Tanvir Mokammel's *Lalsalu*

I notice that it is the first film in which he has opted to be satirical, and the film is at times quite funny. At the same time, the moral of *Lalsalu* is very relevant for us: Tanvir wants us to be as alert now about charlatans who make use of religion for power, or for monetary and sexual gratification as Syed Waliullah did in 1948 when he wrote his masterpiece, writes Fakrul Alam

**C**HARLATANS of all ages and races have found religion a fertile ground for their exploits. Not many years ago, for instance, I remember watching incredulously at the head of a country weep in a place of worship, in full view of the television cameras, of course, and say with tears in his eyes that he had dreamt of being part of that congregation the night before. There was, one remembers, a political crisis in the land then. And in any case, insiders claimed afterwards that he had sent the security people to the place of worship a week earlier! In the American south a decade ago, I watched a televangelist on a Sunday morning preach the word of God, fulminate against sinners, and ask for contributions in almost the same breath. A few weeks later, he was thoroughly discredited as a womanizer and a fraud. Last summer, I woke up in the middle of one night to hear a preacher harangue the congregation over the microphone after having worked them into frenzy, demanding money in the name of God. And wherever you walk in the older parts of our city, it seems that sooner or later you are bound to come across some mound draped in a red shawl or cotton cloth, with a sign identifying some saint, and a box where you could slip in donations.

Not surprisingly, writers have always considered religious charlatans fascinating subjects. In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1386-1400), for example, two of the five 'pilgrims' holding religious offices are cheats, con artists using their professions to exploit the poor people of their parishes. Herman Melville's bitter novel *The Confidence-Man* (1857) has various swindlers ply their crafts on board a 'ship of fools', taking advantage of the mysteries of fate and the ordinary man's inability to either understand or live without them. Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) depicts two frauds duping the ignorant people living on the Mississippi river banks by taking advantage of, among other things, their naivete in matters religious. Rudyard Kipling's brilliant short story, *The Man Who Would be King* (1888) takes us to a liminal part of colonial India to show two renegade English soldiers pretending to be gods. However, one of them overreaches himself, is bitten by a native woman he would like to have as a wife, and is exposed as a human dripping blood! And in Satyajit Ray's characteristically brilliant film *Mohapurush* we have a suave sadhu Baba pretending to be a holy man until exposed as the huckster he is.

In Bangla literature, the classic exposé of religious charlatanism is surely Syed Waliullah's masterpiece *Lalsalu* (1948; translated into English as *Tree Without Roots* in 1967). The story of a man named Majid who appears in a remote village of Bangladesh called Mohabatnagar and who preys on the villagers' religious ignorance and superstition, *Lalsalu* follows Majid from the time he appears in the village with almost nothing to the point when he

is a prosperous man with two wives to boot... Majid's path to worldly success is through his "discovery" of the grave of a holy man whose zealous caretaker he becomes. Soon he sets himself up as the steward of the village itself. Greed and lust, however, make him vulnerable and his control slips when his attempt to force himself on his very young second wife backfires and reveals him to be a hollow man.

Like most fictional masterpieces, *Lalsalu* calls out for cinematic treatment. Fortunately for us, Waliullah's novel has attracted the attention of Tanvir Mokammel, one of Bangladesh's leading directors of what must be called its "alternative" cinema. Relying on his considerable experience in film theory and practice, a commitment to meaningful filmmaking, and a wide-awake conscience, Tanvir has succeeded in presenting

entirely in location by our leading cinematographer Anwar Hossain, the film is memorable for its depiction of the beauty of our riverine country, of the way even a remote village was riven by the Pakistanis and their collaborators, and of popular resistance to the oppressors and their local lackeys.

Tanvir's second full-length feature film, *Chitra Nadi Pare* ("Quiet Flows the River Chitra"; 1998) is also about the life of ordinary people living beside a river. This time, however, Tanvir focuses on the after-effects of the partition of the sub-continent as seen in Narail, a small mofussil town on the riverbank. With compassion and care, Tanvir traces, on the one hand, the emergence of the spirit of secular nationalism and anti-authoritarian, antimilitary consciousness in East Pakistanis and, on the other, state-

that deserves to be seen by people all across the country. And surely the thousands of people who have appreciated Syed Waliullah's novel deserve the opportunity to see this film version!

In the film premiere, Tanvir explained to the audience that he has stuck quite closely to Waliullah's *Lalsalu* except in three ways. First, he has provided an assistant for Majid since in classic tales of religious hucksters they are seen to be working in pairs. Second, while in the novel the hailstorm devastates the novel as if to portray nature's wrath at the way Majid had arrogated power in the village and abused his second wife, in the novel he has used a storm and deluge to strike home the same message. Finally, Tanvir pointed out that he had set the novel around 1947, unlike in the novel where no specific date is mentioned, to show how

and of alternative cinema, Raisul Islam Assad, Majid is a commanding presence, a shrewd judge of people, and a man driven by desire for money and power as well as women. He will stand no competition in the village and one of the most amusing episodes in the film is his confrontation with a holy man with a large following who also claims to be a *pir*. In the climax of this struggle for supremacy over the villagers' souls as well as purses, the rival holy man, here played quite memorably by Aly Zaker in a cameo appearance, ends up in a tree! The other person he has to negate in his drive to become the power of the village is a young idealist (Towquir Ahmed) bent on introducing the village children to modern education -- an obvious threat to Majid's plans. Majid wins this battle too. Nothing, he decrees, should be taught except God's



Dramatic scenes from *Lalsalu*

us with a memorable cinematic version of Waliullah's novel.

*Lalsalu* is Tanvir's third full-length feature film. His first one was *Nadir Nam Madhumati* ("The River Named Madhumati"; 1994). Based on his own story, this was a film about a riverbank village during the war of liberation caught up in the struggle between the forces who would liberate the country from oppression/Pakistani rule and collaborators whose faith in the ideology that had created Pakistan and greed for power, money, and women blinded them to the genocide going on in their land. This first feature film reveals Tanvir's love for Bangladesh, its rivers, and its people, his anti-communal, anti-fundamentalist stance, and his belief in the secular, democratic and socialist values that propelled us to independence. Shot almost

orchestrated threats to communal harmony. But Tanvir is particularly sensitive in this film in his depiction of the forced migration of members of the minority Hindu community to West Bengal in the sixties. In the process, Tanvir reveals that he sees himself not only as a chronicler of our lives in celluloid, but also as a conscience-stricken Bangladeshi. I believe this to be one of the best films to have come out of Bangladesh and know that others have liked it as much as I have done because I saw it drawing large crowds in every showing in the Public Library auditorium. Unfortunately, and this seems to be the fate of almost all the films of our alternative cinema, it was never released in our cinema halls, dominated as they are by the maestros of our film world.

I certainly hope *Lalsalu* will have better luck in reaching a wider audience, for it is certainly a film



Majid is able to exploit a situation when religion was being used aggressively for power play.

These deviations from the novel, however, have not taken the film far away from the world of the novel. Indeed, on the whole, Tanvir has managed to capture the spirit of Waliullah's work quite remarkably. I particularly liked the way the novel began with the shot of Majid saying his prayers by a riverbank and then clears an abandoned plot to uncover the dilapidated grave that he will immediately claim is the *mazar* of the famous *pir* Mudabbar. At this point, Tanvir makes effective use of symbolism when a snake wriggles out of the mound, representing no doubt Majid ready to strike at the innocent villagers.

Majid's rise to power and prosperity in the village is also done adeptly. As acted adroitly by one of Bangladesh's leading actors of the stage

chosen language!

Majid's lust for women leads him first to Rahima (played with restraint and sensitivity by Chitrakar Guha), a hard working and devoted peasant woman. But one wife, of course, will not do, and the second wife must be a much younger and desirable girl (played by Tamanna Yasmin Tithi). Unfortunately for Majid, she is irrepressible in spirit as well. Because her life instinct cannot be curbed, Majid must attempt to tame her or perish in the process. The film suggests that the latter route is the one Majid is destined to take.

Tanvir tells Waliullah's story of a religious huckster rampant in a Bangladeshi village well, and the great merit of his film is its portrayal of ordinary village life of our country and the simple belief of the people that make them so vulnerable



The filmmaker: Tanvir Mokammel

ble to an itinerant confidence man. There are some memorable scenes such as the one in the beginning where a villager tries to ward off the evil spirit from infesting crops or the one where Majid confronts a group of wandering handicapped beggars and drives them out of the village. What irritates Majid is that the beggars, almost literally, sing for their supper, for singing too is a taboo for someone like Majid!

Tanvir Mokammel's direction, for the most part, is praiseworthy. I did find his bid to insert a flashback sequence in the film unconvincing and the final storm scene could have been worked into the narrative better. Also, the scenes depicting Majid's lust are somewhat unconvincingly directed. Nevertheless, Tanvir's *Lalsalu* is well worth seeing and he is congratulated on having the courage to take on Waliullah's novel and the ability to do so without diminishing it. Anwar Hossain's cinematography is, as is always the case with him, at the least competent: *Lalsalu* is a good film to look at! Mahadeb Shi's editing is competent and the two hour long film is well packed. And Tanvir makes good use of the soundtrack to fit it with village sounds.

In short, I think Tanvir Mokammel's *Lalsalu* is a film we can all enjoy. The film also confirms that he is one Bangladesh's leading filmmaker and shows him growing in confidence as a director. I notice that it is the first film in which he has opted to be satirical, and the film is at times quite funny. At the same time, the moral of *Lalsalu* is very relevant for us: Tanvir wants us to be as alert now about charlatans who make use of religion for power, or for monetary and sexual gratification as Syed Waliullah did in 1948 when he wrote his masterpiece!

Fakrul Alam is Professor of English at Dhaka University

## BOOK REVIEW

## Progression of Bangladesh

*Bangladesh on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century* aims to project into the future on the basis of an assessment of the country's past, writes Shahid Alam

Bangladesh on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century, AM Chowdhury and Fakrul Alam, eds., Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2002, pp. viii+598; Taka 700.00

**A**N omnibus of wide thematic spread can present a formidable challenge to a reader whose knowledge would probably fluctuate as much as the diversity of the topics contained in the volume. Particularly if it purports to look into the future of a country which has had a checkered past and continues with a present still undecided about critical aspects of its identity and the historical status of its eminent personalities, *Bangladesh on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century* is one such book. It is the outcome of modified versions of twenty-six papers and a keynote address presented at a seminar organized by the Asiatic Society to, as the editors spell out in the preface, "learn from the past through informed appraisals of various aspects of national life in the last three decades... to come up with appropriate recommendations for the future" (p. V). An ambitious undertaking, given that past mistakes seem to have a mesmeric hold on the psyche of the present nation, but nonetheless, an opportune enterprise, this attempt to look for a way out of the clinging-to-the-past-no-matter-what syndrome and suggest possibilities for the future. Bangladesh is a nation disconcertingly divided along specific entrenched lines, a country that has through three decades of its existence with some significant achievements and even more failures, and requires all the help it can muster from within itself to embark on a future not distorted by unseemly expectations, but by reasonable objectives that can at least positively, if modestly, direct the nation's overall progress.

*Bangladesh on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century*, on taking off from the keynote paper, Rehman Sobhan's holistic "Bangladesh on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: An Agenda for Change," settles into a progression of papers systematically arranged into thematic sections: History and Politics, Economy and Demography, Society and Culture, Governance, Administration and Development, Education, Science and Technology, Environment, and Foreign Affairs. So far, so good, insofar as the subsuming of the major areas of consideration is concerned. Which leads to the point regarding the quality of the essays on offer. Given the heterogeneous mix of the aggregation, it may reasonably be expected that there would be variations in terms of caliber. And so there are. Two outstanding papers perch in splendid isolation atop a heap of essays that range from the very good to the plainly disappointing. Bengalis, in general, are emotional, sometimes overly so, a trait that can be a boon for those with passionate commitment to an idea, but, on the flip side, can be a bane for dispassionate, composed thinking that has to seriously consider, even accept, unpleasant choices. Not a few of the essays have varied doses of the exuberance of emotion in them, thereby detracting from their quality. The two papers that stand out, however Wahiduddin Mahmud's "Bangladesh Economy: Performance, Prospects and Challenges," and Shahend Maliki's "Laws of Bangladesh" are lucidly presented, astutely argued, ranging with authority over the subject-matter, and mercifully free from emotive rhetoric and indiscriminate generalizations.

Sobhan pinpoints democracy, nationalism and social justice as the pivotal areas that will determine

the future course of the country. These are rational selections -- although a case could be made for giving primacy to democracy and social justice -- whose merit lie in priorities that must be adequately dealt with for the other sectors important to the country's well-being to follow. Just how far the country's politics has become, in Sobhan's term, "dysfunctional" is significantly substantiated by the necessity of a caretaker administration in between elected governments, only to have the neutrality of the transient government questioned. Indeed, as Sobhan maintains, the democratic institutions are deteriorating and the culture of intolerance is a contributing factor. However, the tenuous state of democracy is an outcome of an atmosphere of mistrust, a siege mentality, which have seemingly unshakably taken hold of the political parties and that, in turn, have induced the culture of intolerance, and a sickening lack of civility that finds expression in the author's concern at the growing trend of a un-parliament-like parliament. In seeking means to transform the ailing political culture, Sobhan places an inordinate faith in civil society's ability to bring about the change. The author himself betrays his anxiety about his preferred agents of change and, in the process, indicates the crux of the problem: that many in the civil society are stand-offish, willing to dispense with counsel from Olympian heights, and quite unwilling to plunge into the dirty reality of the political world. Furthermore, civil society has, on more than one occasion, publicly demonstrated its capacity to be uncivil to one another and to sections of the society. At least some have been less than democratic within their own organizations and, as Sobhan observes, also "remain divided along the fault lines of Bangladesh's bipolar political system" (p. 18). Tasneem Siddiqui in "NGOs in Bangladesh: Challenges on the Threshold of the New Millennium" addresses some detail the political role of one section of civil society. For example, Sobhan's categorization is extensive, including business associations, while Nazrul Islam in "Urbanization and Urban Development" urges civil society to "prevail on the corporate private sector to prevent them from undertaking anti-people projects" (p. 568).

Civil society has, and will continue to have, as significant role to play in taking the country out of its current overall unsatisfactory state of being, but it would probably best lead by example by performing satisfactorily in the niche each functions in. Sobhan alludes to a telling shortcoming limiting a wide and dominant political role for civil society. "A pro-active civil society means that Bangladeshi will need to come out of their drawing rooms, seminars and coffee shops..." (P.6) and to involve itself above and beyond the ritual of sitting in seminars, giving statements to newspapers or even participating in the occasional demonstration" (p.5). Exactly! Sobhan has hit home, indeed, very close to home.

Wahiduddin Mahmud includes the forbidding climate for FDI among a host of issues confronting Bangladesh's economic future. A comprehensive introduction to his essay lays out the achievements in the country's economic performance -- and they have not been insignificant -- and turns to the enormous challenges of the future, challenges that can be met by devising "a development strategy which will suit its unique

circumstances and will go far beyond the standard prescriptions of market-oriented liberalizing policy reforms" (pp.73-74). Wise words, matched by some specific pragmatic thoughts on ways to meet those challenges. An interesting case in point is his observations on the vast multitude of small-scale entrepreneurs who are excluded both from NGO micro credit as well as the formal banking system. They are almost entirely males who have to depend on disagreeable informal credit sources and, in the process, carry on an uncertain livelihood. Mahmud appreciates the NGOs' efforts in managing micro credit for their target groups of mostly women, but hedges against expansion of these programmes to large-scale activities. He might have dwelt on his reluctance in greater detail but, crucially, emphasizes the role of the government in stepping into the breach to cover the excluded groups with credible and efficient credit delivery mechanisms. This large group, caught up in the changes in society, would look for ways of survival, when avenues for eking out even a modest honest living are closed, through unlawful, including violent, means. Mahmud is seeking investment for development and identifies the principal culprit discouraging investment: sickly financial institutions, a corrupt and inept bureaucracy, pitiful infrastructure and a deficient legal system.

Shahend Maliki takes a close look at that legal system and comes up with a reflective essay that ends with stimulating deliberations on law, development and democracy. He finds a singular lack, or a minimal acceptance, of a vital factor necessary for the improvement of the overall legal system: that the development process hinges on the primacy of the rule of law. Particularly thoughtful are his succinct sections on the criminalization of acts where he accuses the lawmakers of trivializing laws, and the bureaucratization of criminal law where he makes a case for reducing the penal power of the bureaucracy. Maliki is censorious of the spate of draconian laws that have been in force in this country (the Public Safety Act, for example), contending that the "enactment of such laws, in the long run, has worsened the situation in almost every society" (p.446) he has traced the genesis of the positivist legal system to its colonial roots and analyzes the huge chasm between paying lip service to the rule of law and the reality in terms of its practice. In his section on Women and Law he does more profound justice in a few pages to the issue of women's status and rights then Shawna Ara Husain does in an entire essay called "Status of Women." She does not go beyond the standard mantras and grandiose rhetoric that appeal much to the emotion, but rarely focus on specifics that may require unpleasant or unpopular, but rational, recommendations. And catering to the popular, more often than not, has not served Bangladesh well.

*Bangladesh on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century* aims to project into the future on the basis of an assessment of the country's past.

Shahid Alam is freelance writer and filmmaker.

**M**IZANUR Rahman Shelley is a man of letters in the classical mould. His interest is varied and grasp of subjects impeccable. He has an inquisitive and intelligent mind half of which he may have been born with and the rest acquired almost effortlessly. But more than the width and breadth of his knowledge, it is the spontaneity of expression and humility in approach that stand out prominently. Wit, humour and empathy infuse his writing in good measures making him appear more visceral than cerebral. But this is deceptive because his lucidity of expression is bred of intellectual sophistication.

Shelley has followed several muses simultaneously giving the same degree of ardour and concentration to all. Poetry, short stories, novels, belles lettres, travelogue, journalistic pieces and last but not the least, academic works, all have blossomed under his Midas touch. He has excelled in some of these branches while remaining way above average in others. Most importantly, he has never failed to draw attention of his readers and give them satisfaction and not too infrequently their money's worth. As a writer his career can be likened to that of *Ulysses*' *Odyssey* with the difference that his journey does not appear to have reached its end, perhaps his final destination will never be known even to himself.

Part from the diversity and wide variety of his subjects, it is the style of writing that singles him out and impresses the readers most. His English is ornate, almost baroque in style, and the habitual innovation with syntax makes the sentences alluring, even intriguing. Except in academic writing he never appears overly pedantic and formal. His personal essays, fictions and travel account sparkle like a mountain spring and gush forth like a runaway rivulet. Over the years he has developed a signature style of his own and his literary persona shines through his writing like a scintillating light. No work comes closer to this description than his latest publication, "Ulysses Syndrome", a collection of articles written in late eighties and early nineties. Though the subjects vary from article to article they share the common thread of keen observation of people and places, both at home and abroad. All of them have the texture and flavour of travelogue tinged with history. Some even evoke the many splendid atmospheres of fiction. In fact travel account, analysis and fictive description blend in the articles harmoniously making them highly interesting and even rendering some memorable. It is because of this style of writing and the universality and timelessness of some of these subjects that the anthology has a refreshing impact in spite of their being dated.

Shelley starts with a longish piece on his travelling experience in Chapai Nawabganj in 1989. "Beyond the Doorsteps" is a world unto itself. In his sparkling English garnished with rich imagery he evokes the sights and sounds of a nondescript new district town to such an intensity that it ultimately becomes a fabled land transcending its mundane character. The core of this

article is his narration of the legends, myths and history of Vaishnavism in Bengal. Sri Chaitanya, Sri Norotom Das, Poet Chandi Das all mingle with the Muslim rulers of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries in Bengal providing the backdrop to the assimilation of Islamic thoughts into orthodox Hinduism. The history of Vaishnavism and its relation to Islam has rarely been encapsulated in such a short space with so much clarity and vigour. This article is a model of travel writing and arguably the piece de resistance of the book bearing repeated reading. In his description Premital has become more than a place, embracing history, legend and myth and bestowing on its mystical beauty. The article on Arabia is brief and could only consist of the account of various rituals of performing holy Haj. But Shelley's interest ranges far and wide going beyond the present and the visible. He mixes the spiritual with the temporal with dexterity giving them their due weightage. He enquires about the modernization of the erstwhile desert kingdom to learn from their experience, thus revealing his many-sided objectives of the pilgrimage. His curiosities do not come up with complete answers but they lead to relevant directions. In "India, the First Power", Shelley dwells on the exposition by a prominent journalist from India about the country's role in South Asia as if to perceive India through the minds of an Indian intellectual. Shelley quotes the Indian journalist: "There is in the post Indira Gandhi a very articulate and strong demand for power. This mental though policy arrogance is pronounced not only in India's dealing with its neighbours but even with the Great Powers.... In the eyes of the elite the neighbours are much too small and do not matter," Shelley's comment on this is oblique and informative. Referring to the conquest of India