

# Nothing is forgotten, no one is forgiven

In a wide-ranging interview with The Daily Star, Tanvir Mokammel dwells on the theme of liberation as it has been reflected in cinema

Q. All these years after 1971, how much of idealism do you think remains in Bangladesh's politics?

Ans: During the mid-70's wrong people occupied state-power of Bangladesh and since then by manipulating the state-controlled media and by changing the school textbooks they have immensely truncated the history of our liberation war. It is sad that much of the idealism of 1971 is on the wane now. But as the liberation war contains such profound and deeply rooted memories in our national psyche, it will never die whatever efforts may be made by the anti-liberation and extremist forces! Rather if you notice, it is the liberation war books which are the bestsellers in any book fair in Bangladesh. In the collective consciousness of our people the spirit of 1971 still remains very vibrant. But if we talk about realpolitik, well then, a lot of things are amiss.

Q. Would you say that the principles of the war of liberation have been adequately reflected in film and documentaries produced since 1971?

Ans: In the mainstream commercial filmdom, the answer is, a big no. They seem to live in another planet! Sixty to seventy films are churned out of FDC, which is our main commercial film studio, each year. But except for one or two, the liber-

ation war hardly figures in movies.

But in the documentary and alternative film genre there are quite a few sincere efforts. Among these feature films we can mention Tareque Masud's "Mati Moina", Morshedul Islam's "Khelaghar", my own "The River Named Modhumati", all of which are based on the theme of the 1971 war.

During the war Zahir Raihan produced a gem of a documentary, "Stop Genocide", and Alamgir Kabir directed "Liberation Fighters". During the early '80s, when short and alternative cinema emerged in Bangladesh, one can note that our early films, Morshedul Islam's "Agami", my "Hoolya" and Tareque-Catherine's "Muktir Gan" and "Muktir Katha" all reflected the spirit of our liberation war. Actually for us, for that generation of filmmakers, 1971 was the decisive moment in our lives.

Q. There is the quite legitimate feeling that Bangladesh's history has taken a battering since the mid-1970's. In your recent biopic on the late Tajuddin Ahmad, were you making a conscious attempt to correct at least part of that history?

Ans: It is unfortunate that since the mid-1970's, there were deliberate efforts to distort the history of Bangladesh's liberation war. After 1975, to remain in power, General Zia not only allowed anti-liberation and Islamic fundamentalist forces to operate politically but also brought them into the fold of state power. Some were even made ministers!

In my biopic on Tajuddin

Ahmed, the prime minister under whose able leadership the Bangladesh government functioned during those war days, I wanted to present historical events in their proper perspective.

Q. Documentaries such as Tareque Masud's "Muktir Gan" have infused the younger generation with enthusiasm about our struggle for freedom. Do you think more could have been done or can yet be done to instill the young with a sense of history?

Ans. The immense popular success of "Muktir Gan" showed how much our young people were keen to know about the events of 1971. As film-makers, it is our duty to keep the spirit kindled. A lot of new television channels are now on air in Bangladesh. They should make conscious and continuous efforts to show the films, dramas, talk shows and footage on 1971. It should be a continuing process, not merely for the months of December and March!

Q. You have worked on Lalon. You have also focused on the d e b i l i t a t i o n t h a t a tionalism can cause to a society in such works as "Quiet Flows the River Chitra" (Chitra Nadir Pare). Do we see conscious attempts here on your part to link our history in a long chain of tradition?

Ans: We, the artistes of Bengal, have always had the humanist tradition. Even centuries back, a rural Bengali poet uttered "Sabar Upore Manush Satya" (Human beings are above everything)! I guess Lalon, Tagore and all prominent art-

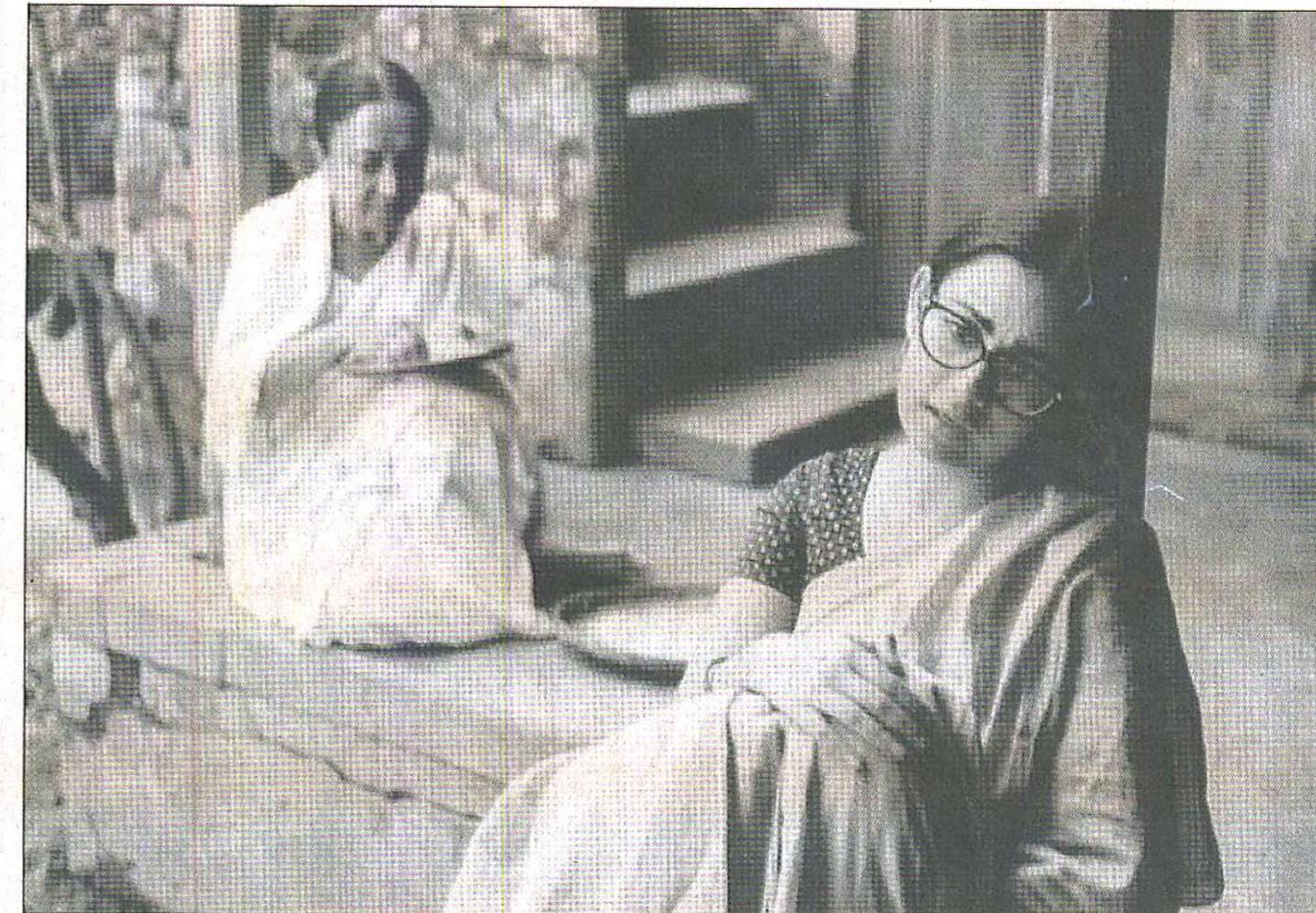
istes of Bengal carried the same message. That is, human beings are the prime, above all differences of religion, caste and creed. What made me interested in Lalon was his profound humanism. As an artiste, it is my job to find humanity in different conditions. Perhaps that guided me to the theme of the 1947 partition in the film "Quiet Flows the River Chitra", as due to the partition of Bengal, millions of families of East Bengal were uprooted from their homes and had to leave for an uncertain destiny as refugees in India. Partition was a grave human tragedy. It solved nobody's problem.

Q. Why does history interest you as a film-maker?

Ans: I am interested in human beings. They are my subject. But in a country like ours, the destiny of people is so much moulded by the events of lived history. History always comes on the way. Actually the events of 1947 and 1971 shaped the destiny of our whole population. So the portrayal of these phases of our recent history is so important for me. The film "Quiet Flows the River Chitra" was on 1947 and I have quite a few films on the 1971 theme, both feature and documentaries. The feature being "The River Named Modhumati", the documentaries are "Rememberance of '71" (Smriti Ekator) and "Tajuddin Ahmad: An Unsung Hero". In some of my other short films, as "Wanted" (Hoolya), "Tale of a Lane" (Ekti Golir Atiyakhini) or "Tale of the Jamuna River" (Aoi Jamuna), the theme of the 1971 liberation war also figured. As I told you earlier, I am working at present on a research-based documentary titled "1971".

Q. In your assessment, what movies and documentaries so far produced would you rate as truly symbolising the Bengali struggle for freedom?

Ans: I must mention two names first Zahir Raihan and Alamgir Kabir. Both were great patriots and secular in nature. Zahir Raihan's "Jibon Theke Neya" (1970) was a very popular work on the theme of the emancipation of the Bengalees. Another popular feature with the theme of Bengalee nationalism during Pakistani times was Khan Ata's "Sirajuddaullah", a melodrama about the last Nawab of Bengal. During the war, Zahir Raihan made a brilliant documentary titled "Stop Genocide" and Alamgir Kabir, an enlightened and driven man, made a worthy documentary, "The Liberation Fighters".



A scene from "Chitra Nadir Pare".

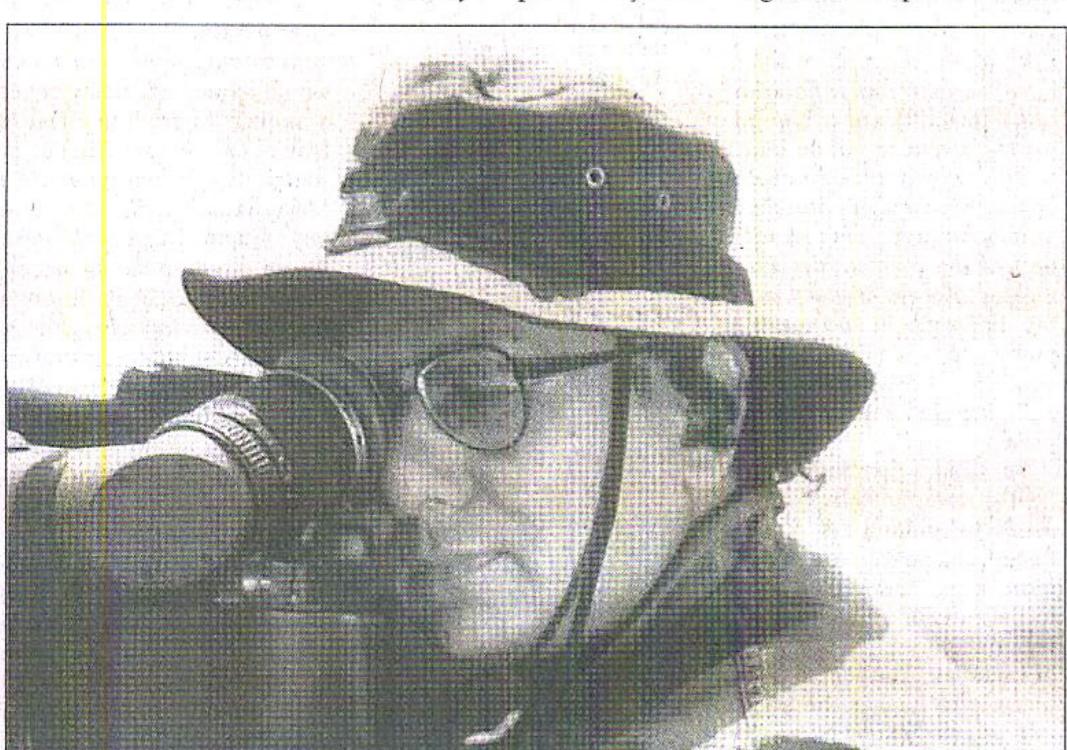
Q. Given that of late the collaborators of 1971 and their adherents have openly challenged the history of the War of Liberation, and as one who has inextricably been linked with film-making, how do you suppose we should meet this challenge?

Ans: I really wonder how they dare to challenge and oppose

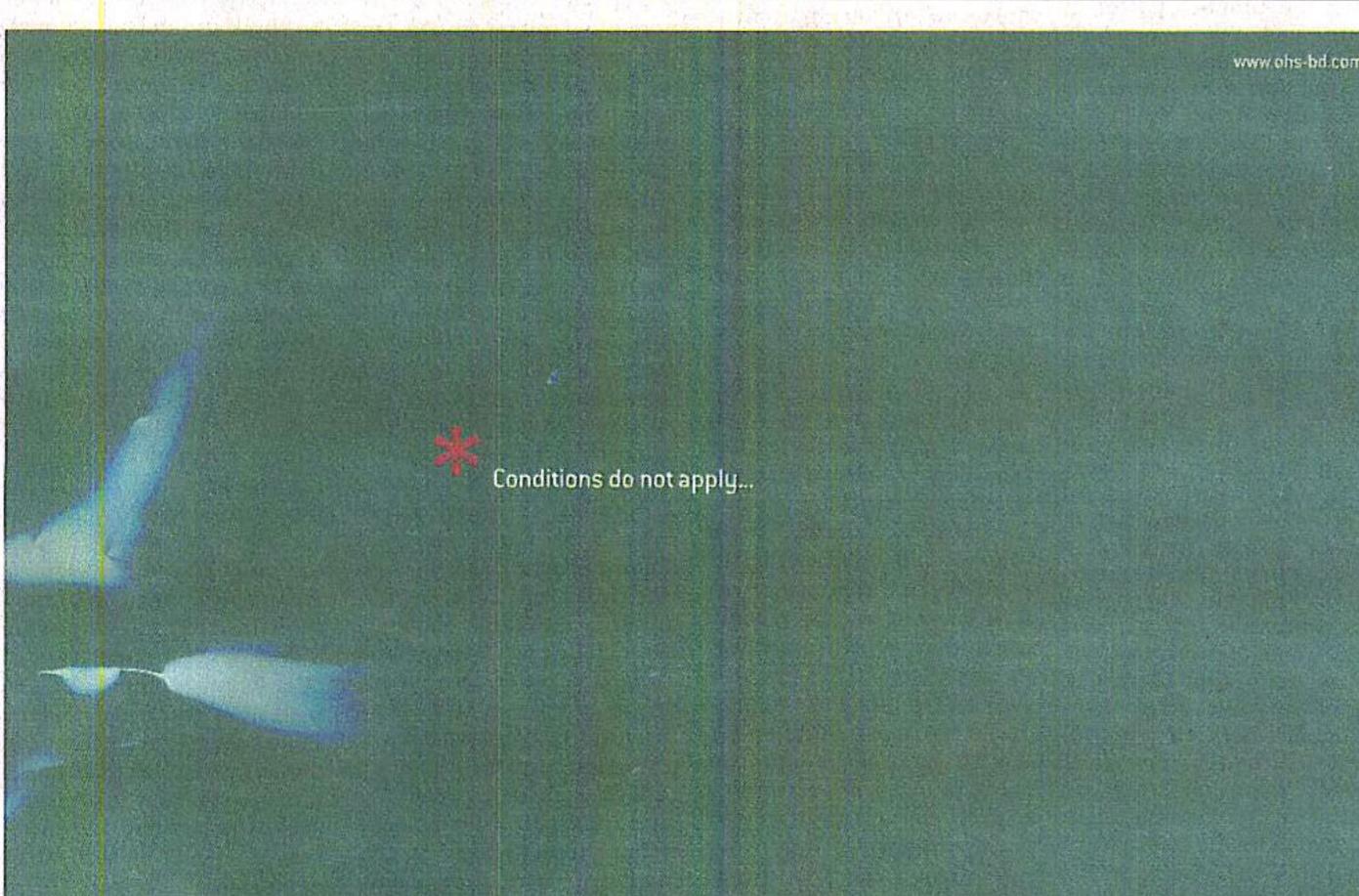
them and show them up to posterity the genocide, the sufferings, the glory and the victory of our people. In my documentary "1971" I am doing exactly that.

I think the government and the civil society of Bangladesh should come out very strongly against these anti-liberation fascist forces. As a film-maker my responsibility is to see to it that nothing is forgotten! No one is forgotten!!

Tanvir Mokammel is a reputed film-maker and has worked on the themes of Bengali cultural traditions and the War of Liberation in his works.



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