

In absence of decent middle cinema

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence, eminent Filmmaker **Tanvir Mokammel** talks to the Daily Star about the deterioration of the film industry, and also about how it can be resurrected.



The Daily Star: During our war of independence, film directors such as Zahir Raihan and Alamgir Kabir played a significant role in the making of an independent Bangladesh. The legacy continued for quite some time until it was replaced by mainstream commercial film which now neither can attract viewers from all walks of life nor can uphold the spirit of independence. What do you think had brought about this deterioration?

Tanvir Mokammel: Our FDC-centred film industry is a philistine and sheer commercial place. Even during the Pakistan-era, when the whole East Bengal was demanding for autonomy and later independence, except the ones from Zahir Raihan, we find no film of protest had come out from FDC. They even produced Urdu-language films as late as 1970! So what can you expect from them? After 1975 FDC also produced films with such titles as "Hur-e-Arab" or "Taj Aur Tolwar"! From the very title of these films you can understand how fatuous the ambience of FDC was, and unfortunately, has remained so.

The only well-meaning efforts to make films imbued with the spirit of the liberation war were in the alternative genre which had been initiated by some young film-society activists during the mid-Eighties.

TDS: Did the pervasiveness of mainstream film necessitate an alternative film movement? Or it was inevitable in any case?

TM: The pathetic condition of our mainstream film industry was of

course incapable to sustain and reflect the taste of the educated people of the country. So it was obvious that an alternative cinema would emerge in Bangladesh. Such short films like "Agami" and "Hooliya", shot outside FDC and in 16 mm, and also exhibited through alternative means, became the forerunners of a new kind of cinema in this country which later was termed alternative cinema. Although often technically flawed, yet sensitive people took a liking for this kind of cinematic endeavours. Some films made in this genre by Tarek Masud, Morshedul Islam or by myself received international recognition too. Since then there was no looking back, and alternative cinema, both in the formats of fiction and documentary, gradually began to gather momentum in Bangladesh.

TDS: You being one of the pioneers of the alternative film movement, how far do you think it has succeeded to bring about a change?

TM: There were definitely some positive changes. First, the very idea that films can be made outside FDC in 16mm and with shoe-string budget, became a new concept in this country. The alternative film-makers had proved that to make a film you do not need the big production houses, big stars or big money. Anyone can make a film if he or she has the necessary technical and aesthetic preparations. After our endeavours, young people now can gather the courage to take initiatives to make their own films. The alternative film movement, to

some extent, has democratised the process of film-making in Bangladesh.

Secondly, it was an inconceivable idea before that films could be exhibited outside cine-halls. By showing our films in the Public Library Auditorium or in other off-cine hall places, the unholy economic power clique, the troika of the exhibitors-distributors-hall owners could be bypassed. People can now watch our films in all different places and this process has caused a change in the traditional ideas of film exhibition too.

TDS: In present-day Bangladesh there is a clear-cut distinction between mainstream and alternative film genres. Viewers of one genre cannot communicate with the other. The widening gap has compelled many to embrace Indian and Hollywood films. Do you think we need a common platform where popular elements of mainstream and rich thoughts of alternative films should be combined to bring our viewers under the same roof?

TM: Society is class-divided, and so, culturally-divided as well. Different sections of people have likings and dislikings for different kinds of cinema. And this is true not only for Bangladesh, but for all over the globe.

I can only tell about myself. My kind of film has a small but niche audience. Just to make my films more popular I have no intention to dilute the subtlety or the political elements of my films. That would be mere box office consideration and I do not make films to mint money.

And so far Hollywood or Indian films are concerned, well, cinema is an international medium. Why should you deprive our people of watching films from abroad? You cannot expect our cine-loving people to swallow all those garbages in the name of cinema produced by FDC just because they are "national"?!

What actually lacks in Bangladesh is the absence of a decent middle cinema, which is neither too fatuous and vulgar like the FDC's run-of-the-mill productions, nor too arty or political like the films of the alternative film-makers. This kind of middle cinema could have established some kind of sanity in our otherwise topsyturvy film industry. Let the film-makers, who are keen for box office, go for that. But I personally believe that I should make only films with those themes for which I feel a creative urge within myself. So I will only make those films which I really want to, no matter how large the audience is.

TDS: How do you think the film industry could be revived again?

TM: Film industry in Bangladesh is lagging almost thirty years behind, not only in the international standard, but even in the standard of this sub-continent. Lot of measures need to be taken to make it worthy and sustainable.

First, there has to be a proper film institute in the country. Cinema is a high-tech art form and its crafts have to be learned. There is no place in Bangladesh where young people can learn practical film-making. So to

establish a film institute is an imperative now.

Then, like Nandan in Kolkata, we should establish a National Film Centre in Dhaka where quality films from home and abroad will be regularly shown and where retrospectives and international film festivals will take place. This will create a positive interest among our audience for the better kind of cinema.

Besides, cinema has to be included in the education syllabus. The universities, both public and the private ones, should include film-studies in their curriculum. The private television channels, and there are quite a few now operating in the country, should involve themselves more in producing and showcasing quality films. Most civilized countries now do that, but unfortunately our first generation television channel-owners either lack the sense for better cinema, or are too much indulged in corporate greed.

In a poor third world country like ours, government is the most potent force, even in the field of culture. The mindset of the government policy-makers and the bureaucrats, who control FDC and the film censor board, need to be changed. They should know how cinema as an art form can, and should be, in a modern and democratic state.

I believe, all these together, may bring some positive changes in the present moribund state of our film industry.

Searching for remains of a Martyr

NADEEM QADIR

FOR more than four years sleep disorder has been killing me. I would doze off at work, quite embarrassingly. But on the night of September 22, 2011, I could not keep my eyes open. That day the remains of my father, Lt. Col.

Mohammad Abdul Qadir, was reburied at Qadirabad Cantonment with full state honour, 40 years after independence and four-and-half years after I traced his grave in Chittagong.

It was indeed a long journey filled with uncertainty, often hopelessness and acute mental pain. It became even worse after I traced his grave and a high-powered military committee confirmed my findings yet it took so long for the authorities to take this decision.

The immediate gift after the reburial was this post in Facebook by my younger brother Naweed:

"I have been posting news of my brother Nadeem's journey to discover my father's burial place after 40 years. Papa was picked up by the Pakistani forces in 1971. I am honoured and happy that Papa got the proper honour from the government of Bangladesh and Bangladesh army. Thank you Bhaiya. Papa is really proud to have a son like you. You have upheld both Ammu and Papa's name by creating Hasna Hena Trust (which honours best report on the Independence War affairs in Dhaka Reporters' Unity competition)."

My sister Rubina said, "Thank you so much, Bhaiya."

Well, as I sleep better, I wanted to share a bit of it with all those who have been following this story with many questions and who gave me the support as I struggled to unearth what really had happened to my "missing" father. The Red Cross had said in a report on Col. Qadir in 1973: "Missing, believed to have been killed."

My mother, late Hasna Hena Qadir, passed away without accepting in her soul that her beloved husband was dead until she had a proof, although for practical reasons there was no choice but to accept the official designation of a Shaheed or martyr. That love was the real cause for me to go on the fact-finding mission of many years. I know she is happy now, but it would have been nice to have her by my side and cry on each other's shoulder, like I did many a time on September 22, 2011 by holding hands.

Col. Qadir was not only my Papa, but a friend even though I was so young at that time. He would always say "you are my best friend and when you grow up, I will share many things with you." The bed-time stories were a routine.

The expected arrival of his third child, Naweed, who was born 10 days after he had been killed on April 17, 1971, has been another of his dream. He was strangely so sure from the time my mother became pregnant that his third child would be a boy and would become my play-mate. "Hey, don't you think it will be great to have a play-mate?" he would often ask me. Naweed was born on April 28, 1971 and incredibly was a duplicate of Col. Qadir. Now a father of two beautiful girls, Naweed is the replica of our father in every possibly way with the added quality of being an IT nerd, musician and a singer.

I have written earlier also that I last waved to my father from the staircase window of our Panchlaish house as he was being taken away in a jeep. I ran to seek help from the neighbours living upstairs. Even then, the smile was there on his face, which probably said, "Son, I will always love you. Take care of the family."

We were given shelter by well-



An artwork implying numerous dead bodies buried in mass graves during 1971.

known banker late Mr. Ruhul Ameen despite risks, as the Pakistani army captain returned a second time that fateful day, lined us up and threatened to kill us or take Rubina or me away from my pregnant mother. "You cannot take them from me, kill us all if you have to," my mother pleaded. They left soon with some cash and ornaments from the almirah.

But, I lost mental balance a few days later from the trauma. The treatment for that still goes on and I was ordered by doctors to stop driving in 1991.

The trauma will remain as long as I

live, but its effects have been controlled by medicines.

My father loved trumpet and bugles. He had a good collection. On September 22, 2011, the bugles finally played the last post to say adios officially to a brave son of the soil and a loving father, whose coffin was draped with the red and green national flag for which he gave his life, and that of the army, the institution he loved and worked for.

Thanks are due to many for making this happen finally. State Minister for Liberation War Affairs Captain (ret'd) M

Tajul Islam assured me that two small gifts to my father would materialize in March when the premier visits Qadirabad Cantonment next year. Thanks are due to many including the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the state minister and Army Chief Gen. Mubeen. My colleague Nehrin Mustafa, her uncle and former Awami League leader in Chitagon Nurul Islam, who is the main witness in the killing as well as burial of Col. Qadir. I literally have no words to thank them. Thank you Almighty Allah.

The writer is a senior journalist.