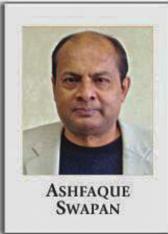


My adventures with *Bhuban Majhi*



I first heard about *Bhuban Majhi* from Shafiq *bhai*, the colourful, ornery owner of Tajmahal Restaurant near Atlanta. I have a soft spot for the man.

Shafiq *bhai*'s culinary repertoire runs the gamut from impeccable *kachchi biryani* to all manners of delicious *bhantas*, including a mean *shutki bharta*. You have to love somebody who is so passionate about *shutki* that he makes his own by drying fish on this roof in the scorching Atlanta sun. I digress. Shafiq *bhai* was annoyed at my ignorance about the film. "You should listen to the lovely music by Kalikapradas. The poor man just died." After half an hour of Googling, I was intrigued. News of the film brought back vivid memories of living through those terrible days in 1971. I wanted to screen it in Atlanta. Seba Bangla Library, the voluntary organisation I'm associated with, backed me. We took added financial risk, but we decided to do it right. We would screen a Bangladeshi film in a state-of-the-art multiplex to offer viewers a proper movie-going experience. As soon as we got to work, it became painfully clear why Bangladeshi films are virtually never screened here. The logistics are just too daunting. It costs an arm and a leg to rent the theatre and pay the film distributor. Then there's the biggest challenge of getting people interested enough to come and watch the film.

I thought the idea of watching a thoughtful film on our liberation war was a no-brainer. Silly me. Little did I know the expat Bangladeshi community.

Many Bangladeshis, I soon discovered, weren't keen, but they were loath to say it outright. They preferred to hem and haw. I quickly learned to detect the tell-tale signs, the thousand-and-one excuses. "It's on Sunday evening? That won't work," a Bangladeshi matron wailed plaintively. "My husband has to go to work early Monday. Our kids go to school. And it's such a long commute. The time's not so good, either. It's too early to have dinner before the show, and it will get really late by the time we are home." She went on and on. I bit my tongue and refrained from responding: "But *bhabi*, surely you're joking! Had this been a show with Shah Rukh Khan prancing about the stage with a bunch of nymphets, you would go even if the show time was on midnight Wednesday. You would be squealing with excitement, with your septuagenarian mom and teenage daughter in tow."

I feigned a polite smile. To be fair, people have a right to choose their entertainment. On the day of the show, I was pleasantly surprised. Well over a hundred people showed up. Friends, acquaintances pitched in with extra support. Some local businesses supported us. After the show, most people were happy with the film. *Bhuban Majhi* is based on a true story of an ordinary person's evolution, of turning from a pacifist into a freedom fighter, during our 1971 Liberation War. What makes it even more compelling is the fact that the film follows the main protagonist



A scene from *Bhuban Majhi*.

to the present, and raises disquieting questions about the ideological fault-lines that remain. That film brought back vivid memories of 1971. As Charles Dickens had said in *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Amidst the Pakistani killing, raping and pillage, a new nation emerged that refused to bow down. The stirring tales of our unarmed youth turning into formidable *muktijoddhas*, the touching, heartwarming support of our Bengali neighbours in West Bengal who unconditionally opened their hearts

and homes to give us refuge, the worldwide public support for our cause and condemnation of Pakistani barbarity – these developments inspired us. Then on December 16, 1971, the hated Pakistani Army surrendered. Their evil partners in crime, the religious bigots, were universally reviled. I was only a kid then, but I remember my joy and relief. Thank goodness, I thought, that the religious bigots openly aligned with the barbaric Pakistani hordes. They will now be banished forever from

Bangladesh politics. We all know that didn't come to pass. *Bhuban Majhi* makes this searing point especially well. I felt a renewed sense of deep anguish at the end of the film. Over four decades after independence, we're still engaged in a Sisyphean struggle to combat religious intolerance. However, it breaks my heart to say this: Good intentions, however noble, are not enough to make a great work of art. This is where *Bhuban Majhi* falls lamentably short. Cinema is the most unforgiving of art forms. The film is wonderful in parts –

there's deceased Kalikapradas Bhattacharjee's simple, enchanting music, Rana Dasgupta's fetching photography, Aparna Ghosh and Parambrata Chattopadhyay's performance. But its flaws are also considerable – Mamunur Rashid's false beard, the poorly enacted battle scenes, the unconvincing, amateurish art direction. The result, in the end, fails to reach the level of authenticity of, say, an Iranian film that I saw – Asghar Farhadi's *The Salesman* (Persian title *Forshande*). Verisimilitude is critical in narrative cinema. Five minutes into *The Salesman*, the viewer is sucked into the story where the absolutely amazing art direction, acting and photography combine to create a gripping illusion of having walked into the lives of a middle-class couple in Tehran. *Bhuban Majhi* fails to do that.

I realise now that you can hear all sorts of good things about a film, but unless you've actually seen the film, it's as risky as going on a blind date. That said, I have absolutely no regrets about screening the film. Even with its flaws, this film is a must-see. If nothing else, it's a mark of respect to one of the most honest and thoughtful cinematic efforts I can think of to explore our Liberation War within the disturbing and compromised contemporary socio-political context. On a different note, we have also learned a sobering lesson: Screening Bangladeshi films in Atlanta is not for the faint-hearted. Call us masochists, but we at Seba Bangla Library are already planning to screen *Aynabaji* in a few months. The writer is a contributing editor for *Siliconer*, a monthly periodical for South Asians in the United States.

Why victim-blaming must end

Rape is never 'her fault'



If the recent Banani rape case has brought anything to light, it is that a sizable portion of our population suffers from a severe victim-blaming mentality. It is baffling that the first question most people chose to ask in response to the Banani rape incident was, "what were these girls doing in a hotel at 2 a.m. with unrelated guys in the first place?" instead of asking the real question: "why do men rape?" Coming from a deeply patriarchal society, the first thing we consciously or subconsciously ask about a rape incident is the extent to which the victim herself can be held responsible for her own rape, especially when the perpetrator was not a complete stranger. We do this by qualifying the status of victimhood by imposing an "ideal victim" standard, a term coined by a Norwegian criminologist, Nils Christie. He defined the ideal or "perfect" victim as "a person or category of individuals who...most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim" (*From Crime Policy to Victim Policy*, ed. Ezzat Fattah, Macmillan: London, 1986). Rape victims who do not conform to this standard (by for instance, transgressing what we perceive to be the ideal role of women in society and public life) are victim-blamed and largely denied the status of victimhood. An example of who would be considered an ideal victim in our culture is a woman who only leaves the house during the day, out of necessity, while modestly dressed and preferably with a male guardian. In imposing this standard, we end up asking immaterial questions about the victim when we should instead be inquiring about the rapist(s). Who was she with? What was she

doing? What was she wearing? Why was she there in the first place? In other words: did the woman do all she could to avoid getting raped or did she essentially bring it on herself? Tonu was readily granted the victim status since she was out during the day in the safest part of Dhaka to attend classes and was wearing the hijab. In the Banani rape case, however, the two victims failed to meet the

questioned the girls' decision to be at a late night party to begin with and use that as a reason to blame the girls. They justify their position by drawing ridiculous and insulting analogies along the lines of: "if you walk in to the cage of a tiger, do not be surprised if it leaps on you". Because apparently, a man's urge to rape is akin to an uncontrollable animal instinct which women must be careful not to provoke and so they must always

misogyny in the guise of misinformed religiosity. Even though rape is one of the gravest sins in Islam, punishable by a mandatory death sentence, these people chose to give the rapists a free pass and decided to moral police the rape victims instead. Embedded within this line of thinking is the notion that rape is an almost inevitable calamity which is bound to happen if women live their lives in the "wrong way". As such, it is women themselves who have the sole responsibility of taking sufficient precautionary measures to prevent being raped. In other words, society at large would rather tell women "please, do not get raped" instead of telling their precious male offspring: "for the love of basic humanity, do not rape".

bunch of boys have committed something as heinous as gang raping two girls at gunpoint, in what sense is the victims' lifestyle choices more worthy of our scrutiny? By shaming the victim and blaming her for her own rape, we end up normalising rape and perpetuate an insidious rape culture. Victim blaming is a dangerous red-herring which deflects the blame and focus from the heinous acts of the rapists, to that of the victims, at a time when it should be clear which of the two is more deserving of the blame.



PHOTO: SIGNSJOURNAL.ORG.

ideal victim standard by attending a birthday party of unrelated males wearing "western clothing", that too, so late at night. Therefore, these victims were victim-blamed along the following lines: There are those who instinctively

consider the possibility of getting raped before they have the audacity to run off to something as perilous as a birthday party. Of course, victim-blaming would be left incomplete without the token self-righteous male chauvinists parading their unabashed

Worse yet is the fact that an alarmingly high number of women themselves victim-blame those women who have been raped but did not meet the ideal victim standard. Perhaps they do so as a means to distance themselves from an unpleasant occurrence and therefore affirm their own invulnerability to that particular risk (Rape Culture, Victim Blaming and The Facts, Connecticut Sexual Assault Services, 2016). By blaming the victim of causing the rape to happen by her own actions, they can view the victim as being different from themselves. They reassure themselves by thinking, "I would never go to such a place at such a time wearing such a dress, so this would never happen to me." This is not to say that we should abstain from encouraging girls to make wise choices in a country which has manifestly proven itself to be grossly incapable of guaranteeing their basic safety. However, to do so in retrospect, in response to a rape case, by analysing a victim's decisions, does not count as 'advice' or stating 'common sense'. It is insensitive, untimely and simply a form of victim-blaming, which must stop. When a

This damaging thought pattern causes victims to blame themselves for their own ordeal in the aftermath of rape. And then these same victim-blammers have the gall to question why the rape victims "took so long" to report their case instead of "going to the police right away" and then use this time-lag to further discredit the genuineness of the victims' claims. They do so in complete ignorance of the fact that rape victims undergo severe physical and mental trauma that they must first overcome before they can file a case. Moreover, rape victims have to contemplate whether filing a case would, in fact, be worth the (misplaced) social stigma which they would be on the receiving end of as soon as they make their rape known. Little wonder then that the vast majority of rape cases remain unreported. Until this culture of victim-blaming ends, victims of rape simply will not have the courage to file their cases within a prompt time-frame, after which, the key medical evidences permanently disappear, making it that much more difficult to prove their case in court. It is high time we learned to accept that a woman should not have to be a saint in order to qualify as a rape victim — she need only be forced to have sexual intercourse without her consent. The writer is a trainee-advocate at Chancery Chambers in Bangladesh and a legal volunteer at the Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR - Manabdhikar).

QUOTABLE Quote

VICTOR JARA
Chilean poet, singer and political activist

*I don't sing just to sing
neither because I have a good voice.
I sing because the guitar
makes sense and has a reason*

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 "A midsummer Night's Dream" character
- 7 Letter after epsilon
- 11 Cat
- 12 Singer Burl
- 13 Smooth writing implements
- 15 Stories
- 16 Escalator part
- 18 Street edge
- 21 Sow's mate
- 22 Official documents
- 24 Boxing great
- 25 Light metal
- 26 Sticky stuff
- 27 Muscle connector
- 29 Aspirin target
- 30 Goblet part
- 31 Tedious
- 32 Fable writer
- 34 Livestock areas
- 40 Fan's favorite
- 41 Aviator Earthart
- 42 Hot
- 43 Fitzgerald title character

DOWN

- 1 Amiss
- 2 Pollen collector
- 3 Building wing
- 4 Singer Tex
- 5 Like draft beer
- 6 Diamond of music
- 7 Closes, as a jacket
- 8 Genesis name
- 9 Wallet bill
- 10 Cart puller
- 14 Praline nut
- 16 Foot parts
- 17 Sully
- 19 Majestic
- 20 Cook, in a way
- 21 Slugger's need
- 22 Grenade part
- 23 Junior, to senior
- 25 Actress Marisa
- 28 Fatal
- 29 Marionette's kin
- 31 Church tenet
- 33 Unseen problem
- 34 Towel word
- 35 Exalted poem
- 36 Smoked salmon
- 37 High trains
- 38 Quill tip
- 39 Utter

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

G	E	T	T	O	C	A	S	T
A	L	O	O	F	O	M	A	H
P	I	N	O	T	N	Y	L	O
T	E	S	T	T	U	G		
T	E	C	H	N	E	R	D	
A	T	O	P	T	O	R	E	U
C	O	M	I	C	L	A	P	S
O	N	E	C	A	R	F	E	E
M	U	D	C	O	O	P		
A	N	O	D	E	G	I	A	N
I	D	E	A	L	A	C	H	O
D	O	R	M	S	S	K	A	T