

RENDERING THE GREAT SENSE OF LOSS OF 1947 THROUGH FILM

In conversation with Tanvir Mokammel

Tanvir Mokammel is an award-winning filmmaker from Bangladesh, critically acclaimed for his historical and political commentaries in films such as *Nodir Naam Modhumoti* (1995), *Lalsalu*, (2001) and *Jibondhuli* (2014). He remains the only filmmaker from Bangladesh whose work has focused on the partition in a comprehensive manner. His feature film *Chitra Nadir Pare* (1999), which won seven national awards, follows the life of a Hindu family in the then East Pakistan. His latest project, *Seemantorekha*, is a documentary about the Partition of Bengal, the arbitrariness of borders and its effects on a people displaced. The documentary is in its post-production stage.

In an interview with Star Weekend, Mokammel talks about the significance of 1947 in his films, the role of artists in documenting history and the amnesia surrounding Partition among Bangladeshi filmmakers.

Why has the Partition featured so prominently in your life and in your work?

The reasons, I guess, are two-fold. In my conscious mind, in the socio-political-intellectual plane, I believe that the Partition of 1947 was the root cause for all the anomalies we are suffering from in our present society now.

Another reason, I guess, lies in my subconscious. Bengal had been a cultural entity for more than 2000 years. By dividing Bengal, the very existence and emotions of our Bengali identity, our deeply rooted cultural traits have been shattered. It is true that Bengal, in different times in history, remained divided in different states—Somotot, Rar, Harikel, Barendra etc. But never before the 1947 Partition was the division so decisive, so complete. Never was a barbed wire erected between our Bengali population. Hence, the Partition of 1947 haunts me with a great sense of loss, and it keeps figuring in my films and writings repeatedly, like a leitmotif.



Tanvir Mokammel

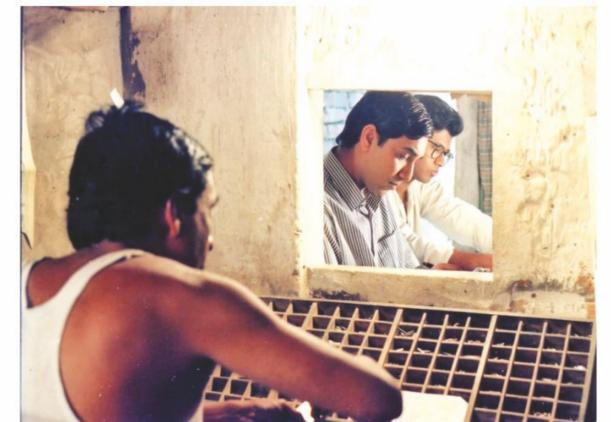
Your film *Chitra Nadir Pare* emphasises the little-talked-about 1964 riot and the migration of the Hindu population to India. Why did you choose that as your subject?

An artist generally portrays what he has seen or experienced. I saw the 1964 riot. Though I was a mere boy at that time, I vividly remember the event. I grew up in Khulna and before the 1964 riot, Khulna had a huge Hindu population. In the pre-partition days, the Hindu population in Khulna district, in fact, constituted the majority—51 percent. So, a lot of my childhood friends from school, and the boys from my locality with whom I used to play, were Hindu.



Stills from *Chitra Nadir Pare*

A Hindu lawyer's family used to live just next to our house in Narail. One day I heard that the lawyer was telling my father: 'Mokammel Saheb, I will never leave Narail. I will not be happy even in heaven if I leave the banks of the Chitra river.'



They left Khulna (and also the then East Pakistan) after the 1964 riot. For me, that was a deep shock. I still miss my childhood friends!

Besides, my mother was a very courageous woman. She used to teach in a local college. During those riot-torn days, my mother would go around Khulna town in a rickshaw, pick up her Hindu colleagues or students, mostly female students, and some families she knew, and bring