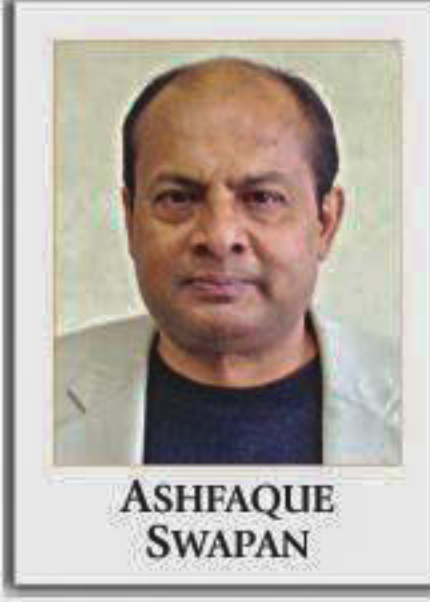


Reflections on current Bangladeshi cinema



ASHFAQUR SWAPAN

are my own impressions.

Cinema is challenging. In Bangladesh, is it possible for this most modern and prohibitively expensive art form to do justice to aesthetic standards without breaking the bank?

There was a time when Bangladesh's cinema seemed a lost cause, whether as an art form or as an industry. Few films reached a level of excellence to pique the interest of the cognoscenti. Cinemas were closing, films failed to draw the masses.

In recent years, things appear to be looking up. I think Amitabh Reza Choudhury's *Aynabaji* really made people sit up and take notice. What's even better, the film did well at the cinema – and started a fledgling market abroad drawing expatriate Bangladeshis.

But do Bangladeshi films have what it takes? Let me start by a thumbnail review of the two films.

Doob, to belabour the obvious, created considerable controversy – never a bad thing commercially – as a thinly-veiled story of the extramarital romance of a Bangladeshi author.

Now I happen to be one of very few Bangladeshis on earth who did not follow every detail of the actual love story. I was aware that the film was loosely inspired by the real-life story. However, given my unfamiliarity with the nitty-gritty of the writer's saga, I had the opportunity to view *Doob* on its merits. I saw it the same way I saw Rituparno Ghosh's *Abohoman* – a film which had its own share of controversy after being accused of depicting Satyajit Ray's alleged

affair with Madhabi Chattopaddhay. I loved *Abohoman* – it mattered little to me exactly how much it borrowed from Ray's real-life experience. It was a sensitive inquiry into how an extramarital affair tears apart a family, and leaves the other woman, if you will, also in considerable pain.

Doob captures this pain remarkably well, too. Much to its credit, the film avoids the more salacious elements, and focuses on the relationships that are torn apart by the protagonist's infidelity. The protagonist is a hugely successful filmmaker, and his affair and subsequent marriage leaves pretty much everyone in harrowing pain – his now ex-wife, his daughter and his current wife. The filmmaker himself is not spared either.

Overall production values are excellent, with special credit for photography. The acting for the most part is quite good.

Yet the film has serious flaws. The choice of Irrfan Khan doesn't work – his delivery of Bengali dialogues is particularly jarring. (Farooki ought to have taken a page out of Ghosh's *Bariwali* – Ghosh had non-Bengali speaker Kirron Kher's dialogues dubbed.)

The lifestyle is too affluent. No film director has that kind of money. Film producers, maybe. A film director building a new apartment in Gulshan while having another retreat and a studio? Come on!

The interior decoration is too artsy – this is the stuff of the fantasy la-la land of ad films and daytime soaps. For all its filmmaking power, the film does not seem quite real.

Then there is the staccato editing. Just how much of it was the director's choice and how much enforced by a lawsuit I cannot tell, but the end product is a very slipshod, chopped up film which leaves too many narrative holes.

However, I do not share the griping of many aficionados of the said writer on which the film is loosely based upon about how the film did or did not hew to the real-life story. I think on its own merit, the film, while flawed, is a sensitive and artistically promising effort.



A still from *Doob*, the latest film by Mostofa Sarwar Farooki.

Dipon's *Dhaka Attack* is a completely different kettle of fish. Its artistic pretensions are few. Its technical values are much better than commercial Bengali cinema, but then that's a really low bar. The filmmaker's goals are more modest – it's an attempt to make an entertaining police procedural.

By Bangladeshi standards, its achievements are impressive. It is fast-moving and packed with action. This is a police force complete with state-of-the-art lab, SWAT teams and police officers who can hold their own with anything in the West.

On a very superficial level, it works well. No wonder crowds are thronging the cinemas.

But look a little more carefully, and the warts begin to show. I'll grant you that judging a commercial film by too exacting a

standard is a fool's errand, but credulity has its limits.

The crime lab is a joke – just why a police officer should brood on computers that spew out chemical formulae in large print is one mystery the film refuses to solve. The SWAT team commander's English commands are as contrived as they are silly. It's clear that Dipon has been inspired by U.S. television police procedurals, but he has failed to do the homework to make his police procedures convincing. Some *masala* elements are expected – the song-and-dance routine is standard for South Asian cinema, but one marriage song – "*Tikatulir Moray*" – with its gauche dancing and gaudy folk singing – is so awful to sit through that I would not wish it upon my worst enemy.

On the basis of watching these films, my

own assessment is blunt: Bangladeshi cinema has taken some impressive steps, but it has a long, long way to go. If Bangladeshi filmmakers want to tap (almost wholly Bangladeshi expatriate) audiences abroad, they'll have to step up their game a notch.

In fact, I saw *Doob* in Atlanta, where Seba Bangla Library, an organisation I am associated with, organised the screening. I'm sorry, but I could not, in good conscience, support a screening of *Dhaka Attack* (others are doing it in other cities), because in this age of Netflix and Hulu, viewers are too sophisticated to accept a film like this.

Bangladeshi filmmakers aren't there yet. But they've made a start, and I give them credit for that.

The writer is a contributing editor for *Siliconeer*, a monthly periodical for South Asians in the United States.

Old words in new voices



CHINTITO SINCE 1995
NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

IT'S a wonderful feeling, ascendancy to almost ministerial heights, when you hear your old words in new voices, and more important, *manoniy* at that.

I am not really the bragging sort, and you bear witness (hic), but recently some ministers, in fact two that I certainly know of, are talking in my language. Pardon me, shouldn't it be the other way round?

That is not to insinuate in any way that either of them collected my article (Oh no!), and did not have the decency to pen the credit line favouring me. Oh no, not that! In reality that is a distant possibility because my understanding is that politicians watch television that

only portray them and only read printed material that depict them positively. Most ministers are conscious, imperceptibly so they think, about earning TV time and column inches.

Since my 2007 Chintito was about the misuse of Bangla in local radio as a language uttered, fat chance any of them even knew about my thoughts on the same topic. But, both have struck the right chord, having heard the wrong ones on radio and television.

Today is not the first time I am refraining from beating my own drum. The last time was 2012 when in my piece in this column "Distant Ripples Touch the Shores of Sanity" I was heartened to see that the government and the judiciary, as well as some others, were taking a laudable stance against the adulteration of Bangla by a section of our media about which I was *chintito* many moons ago; in fact not even in the month of February. On October 2007, the original Chintito was

"Not much *foorti* on radio today". In advocating my 10-year-old campaign, on January 20, State Minister for Information Tarana Halim instructed radio stations in the country to use Bangla that is *suddho*, "correct" somehow does not convey the complete sense. In a ministry note, she directed radio stations (in Bangla of course) not

every single *arjay* has the similar sing-song theme, different names though, and to a great extent the same happy-don't-care attitude, and a highly anglicised accent, more or less.

To further the slow damage of our youth, some of these radio stations have a bizarre fascination for alien songs, Hindi, Urdu, English, you name it. *Arrey*

broadcasting from the rooftop of some town in Maharashtra or a cave in NWFP. This is not on.

Foorti or not *foorti*, today or tomorrow, radio or TV, there is no reason whatsoever to play alien songs as a routine on our local radio stations. That is not why this nation has sacrificed so much for so long. That is not why the government of Bangladesh granted the broadcasting license. This is the time to rectify. Please.

And, in 2012 I was pleased to write: The High Court in a suo moto rule (February 16, 2012) directed radio and television channels not to use distorted Bangla or foreign languages in Bangla broadcasts. The HC bench also issued a rule upon the government to explain why it should not be directed to take necessary steps against the distortion of Bangla language or use of foreign languages in Bangla programmes on the radio and TV channels. Besides, the court asked the government to explain why it should not be ordered to take legal action against those responsible for distorting the mother language and to cancel the licenses of the radio and TV channels airing such programmes.

I was humbled then, for the ripples caused by the drumbeats of my 2007 column against the distortion of our mother tongue by a section of the media had finally touched the shores of sanity. *Joy Bangla!*

About one hundred years ago, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a prominent Indian socio-political leader said, "what Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow." However, that is not relevant as both the ministers and I are from Bengal.

However, please allow me to conclude today with the words, what Chintito thinks today...

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If our local TV channels, so many of them, can successfully run for years, and flourish, without the aid of their bideshi counterparts, then why should these radios have to rely so much on hum-tum, and idhar-udhar? Can you imagine one single radio station in any of the SAARC countries, despite the brotherhood, to be even intermittently playing Bangla songs of Bangladeshi artistes?

to present erroneous and corrupt Bangla and English in their programmes. She went somewhat further explaining that "*Bangreze*", a weird cocktail of part-Bangla and part-English, using words such as "I know" and "You know" should be stopped.

Earlier on March 7 last year, championing my longstanding cause, Information Minister Hasnul Huq Inu told parliament, no less, in reply to a query that "the government has directed all private television channels and radio stations to form a preview committee to stop distortion of Bangla language and its pronunciation". Such a move was necessary because, "there are wide spread allegations that private radio stations and TV channels use incorrect words and distorted Bangla in the dramas and advertisements they broadcast".

And here are excerpts of what I wrote in 2007:

Eighty-eight or eighty nine, almost

Bhai! This is a radio station broadcasting from Dhaka. While applying for a government permit they must have committed to herald the culture of this timeless nation. They should have been granted the right to broadcast in this country based on their resolve to represent Bangladesh in mind, body and soul, in politics and culture, in news and views. One wonders the basis of their audacity and wisdom in ushering in quite unnecessarily *tu agar kabhibhijaye...*

If our local TV channels, so many of them, can successfully run for years, and flourish, without the aid of their *bideshi* counterparts, then why should these radios have to rely so much on *hum-tum*, and *idhar-udhar*? Can you imagine one single radio station in any of the SAARC countries, despite the brotherhood, to be even intermittently playing Bangla songs of Bangladeshi artistes? Unthinkable, *taina!* And here, a radio station does it as if they were



QUOTABLE Quote

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW
IRISH PLAYWRIGHT, CRITIC, POLEMICIST, AND POLITICAL ACTIVIST
(JULY 26, 1856-NOVEMBER 2, 1950)

I am afraid we must make the world honest before we can honestly say to our children that honesty is the best policy.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Rum cakes	29 Napkin spot	7 Greedy one
6 Left over	30 Obscures	8 Poet Maya
11 Minor no more	34 Guitar booster	9 Incumbent's verb
12 Sheet material	35 Light metal	10 Infinite
13 Fooled around	36 Originally called	14 Nice guy
15 Work unit	37 Pamper	19 Patela's place
16 Fellows	40 Exemplary	22 Extinct bird
17 Building wing	41 Playing area	23 Deli buys
18 Looking for	42 Grassy plant	24 Apple pie order
20 Director Ang	43 Raid	25 Brought down
21 Tennis need	DOWN	26 Highway exit
22 Clinic workers,	1 Hay bundles	28 Fashionable
for short	2 Find darling	30 Fashion
23 Completely full	3 Swell	31 Beneath
26 Track tipsters	4 The whole	32 Perry's assistant
27 Lotion additive	amount	33 Run-down
28 Cow's chew	5 Thwarted	38 Fall back
	6 Informal talk	39 God, in Roma

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

I CAN'T FIND BEETLE, SARGE

KEEP LOOKING! WHEN WE FIND HIM, HE'LL BE IN BIG TROUBLE!

STOP THAT CAN!

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

G	A	T	O	R	S	O	F	A	H	
A	D	O	R	E	A	H	E	A	D	
L	A	N	E	S	T	O	R	M	E	
E	G	O	T	I	E	M	I	A		
N	E	W	C	A	R	S	M	E	L	
A	T	E	A	N	N	E				
G	E	S	T	E	E	N	T	E	R	
A	N	T	E	A	S	I				
F	L	O	R	A	L	S	C	E	N	T
F	I	R	G	E	E	N	A			
E	V	A	D	E	N	A	D	I	R	
R	E	G	A	N	C	L	I	V	E	
N	E	S	T	E	A	S	E	S		

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

OH, DEAR! I'VE FOUND IT! THAT BAD?

WAIT 'TIL YOU SEE HAMMIE'S MATH HOMEWORK.

I'LL BRING US A GLASS OF WINE.

WE ALSO HAVE TO READ HIS BOOK REPORT.

I'M GONNA NEED A BIGGER GLASS.