

# Let's stand by our lone rangers: The role of RTI activists

SHAMSUL BARI AND RUHI NAZ

WHEN young Shovon moved to Dhaka from his village not very long ago, he went looking for ponds to bathe in. He discovered quite a few of them, spread all over the city. But he was soon dismayed to learn that ponds and other waterbodies were fast disappearing to make way for development. Fearing the same fate for the remaining ponds, he began looking for those which were in danger, hoping to do something to save them. He has done so since then. The activist in him put him on a relentless mission to help the remaining ponds of Dhaka to survive.

It may not seem obvious, but Shovon is following a long Bengali tradition. Bengal was the bastion for social and political activism during British India. Activists of Bengal led the way for the eventual departure of the British from India. Similar activism during Pakistani times hastened the emergence of Bangladesh.

Democracy thrives best in societies where citizens play an active role to hold in check power and authority. Bangladesh is fortunate to have inherited a rich tradition in this regard.

Activism is, however, context dependent. What was useful in colonial times may not be so under democracy. The approach deployed against a more democratic and tolerant regime may not fare well under repressive and harsh rule. The current international trend towards greater authoritarianism and control is reflected in Bangladesh as well. The government is better equipped today than before to deal with public dissent. As a result, the methods we used in the past such as blockading, boycotting and the like, appear to be out of place today: the word "hartal" has almost disappeared from our political lexicon.

New approaches for activism are sprouting in this new era. Much has been written about

the explosive growth of social media—and the other technological advances of our time—and their role in social change. But let us not ignore a new, albeit low-tech, tool. It too is readily available and full of promise: the Right to Information (RTI) Act 2009.

The adoption of the RTI Act was based on the principle that in a democracy citizen have the right to know how well their government is serving their interest. Citizens may obtain relevant information available with most public bodies to monitor their work and ensure that they perform their tasks honestly and diligently. Activism is thus built into the system.

While the law is yet to be fully understood and used by our citizens, a few who have are already putting it to good use.

People entitled to government's safety net programmes such as vulnerable group feeding, old age and maternity benefits, etc. are being helped by activists to send RTI queries to relevant bodies, seeking information on—for example—who is on the list or how recipients are chosen. Such requests were often enough for them to be called in and told that they are indeed on the list: the authorities would rather give in than have their misdeeds revealed. In some places, it became a practice to post recipient lists on notice boards.

RTI interventions were addressed to public health clinics for information on the list of medicines made available to them by the government for free distribution to the indigent. Where previously the medicines were sold to the intended beneficiaries by corrupt officials, the free medicine lists are now published on notice boards of the clinics.

Similarly, scholarship money meant for school children is now being disbursed in full. Before RTI activists turned their attention to them, they were subjected to unlawful deductions by school authorities. In all these



**Democracy thrives best in societies where citizens play an active role to hold in check power and authority. Bangladesh is fortunate to have inherited a rich tradition in this regard.**

examples, the law helped to bring systemic change for proper implementation of government programmes.

Sadly, there are not enough such stories. RTI activists must jump over many hurdles and through many hoops. They face difficulties and threats from irate public officials or those fearing exposure of their corruption. The Information Commission too is far from helpful. Instead of being proactive, as envisaged in the law, it is prone to question the intention of the applicant for seeking the information in the first place. It is enough to dampen the spirit of any RTI user.

When Shovon discovered that ponds in Dhaka were being filled up, he informed himself on the law and found that the Natural Waterbodies Conservation Act 2000 made filling of ponds a punishable offence. He then began to contact the Environment

Directorate whenever he learnt about any imminent danger to a pond.

In early 2016, Shovon learned that a pond, known as "Pottery Pukur", in Rayer Bazar area of the city, was being filled up by a Housing Company. He immediately tried to contact the Environment Directorate. He called, wrote and cajoled. His dogged persistence forced the Directorate to finally undertake an on-site investigation, in May 2016. It revealed that "Pottery Pukur" did indeed exist but was now totally filled up, illegally. A Housing Company was preparing to commence construction on the spot.

The Environment Directorate ordered a halt on all further activities on the spot, threatening the Company of legal action in default. It informed the concerned city authorities to undertake necessary measures to bring the pond back to its original state.

A fine of more than Tk 14,00,000 was subsequently imposed on the Company and duly levied. But after that nothing happened to indicate that the pond would resurrect. Fearing inaction, Shovon proceeded like a lone ranger, with more phone calls, more letters, more outreach to anyone who could help, including the media. He also resorted to the RTI Act for help.

He found the Information Commission's role particularly unhelpful and perfunctory. His complaint hearing took place without him, as the Commission refused to change the date despite his formal request for a short postponement due to personal reasons. The Commission heard only the representative of the Environment Directorate and directed him simply to provide the information sought by Shovon. It made no effort to find out about the fate of the pond itself, as clearly anticipated in the RTI Act. The Environment Directorate simply informed Shovon what he already knew. There was nothing to indicate what further action it intended to take on the matter, if at all.

More than three years have passed since Shovon embarked on his mission to save "Pottery Pukur". He hasn't given up yet, though he fears retaliation by those disturbed by his intransigence. His efforts with all the concerned authorities have continued, yielding only perfunctory and evasive answers.

Will the matter simply fizzle out? Will our "Pottery Pukurs" continue to be stolen? Will our Shovons be forced to give up their dreams to be useful citizens of the country? Are the days of activism in Bangladesh over? Let us remember the contribution of activists of the past to bring us where we are today. And remember that each age needs its own activists.

Dr Shamsul Bari and Ruhi Naz are Chairman and Project Coordinator (RTI section) respectively of Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB). Email: rib@cittech-bd.com

# Disney's Aladdin and the appropriation of culture



IMPELLED largely by curiosity and not a little by the inner kid in me that is still in awe of fairy tales, I went to the cinema to watch a Disney film, a pleasure I strictly avoid.

Disney's *Aladdin* comes wrapped in Disney's latest gimmick, "live action." In movie parlance, this means that instead of animated cartoons, these movies feature real-life actors and animals, real or fantastic, which look so real that you can't tell the difference.

Don't get me wrong. It's not an awful movie. Disney's formidable production values, mind-boggling special effects and toe-tapping tunes that will cast such a spell on little children that their parents will rue the day they decided to take their kids to watch it.

To give Disney its due, it has taken note of previous critiques. This effort appears to be culturally more sensitive. The character and the setting attempt a (flawed) feel of the Middle East (the original story is set in China, but never mind), though characters talk like Americans. Most actors are non-white.

Unfortunately, for all of Disney's good intentions, the film left me deeply disturbed because of the broader implications. I left the theatre with a disquieting feeling that a fairy tale had been seized, drained of any authentic cultural character and converted into a cultural condiment that is bland, homogenised and essentially rootless, not unlike other ham-handed American attempts. (I'm looking at you, Taco Bell. This American fast-food chain has gulled US customers into believing it sells Mexican food. This was apparently news to folks in Mexico, where it tried to open its restaurants. Mexicans, bless their hearts, were deeply unimpressed. Taco Bell had to close shop.)

With *Aladdin*, Disney plays fast and loose with the story. In the original story, the incident happens in China, and there are not



**Disney's Aladdin comes wrapped in Disney's latest gimmick, "live action." In movie parlance, this means that instead of animated cartoons, these movies feature real-life actors and animals, real or fantastic, which look so real that you can't tell the difference.**

one but two genies—the more powerful one with the lamp, and another one with a ring. Other major liberties are also taken.

I suppose I could live with that. But what really upsets me is the cultural ambience of the film, or rather the lack of it. On closer look, for all the expense lavished on the film, instead of appearing culturally rooted, the film appears to take place in cultural la-la land. The costumes and sets represent less an actual geographical location than a kitschy cultural confection that exists only in the fevered imaginations of Disney. It's not

an accident that it has a distinct Bollywood feel to it; Bollywood's stock-in-trade, after all, is creating a cultural ethos that is also a complete figment of the imagination.

Yet actual fairy tales are deeply invested in their specific location and culture. I grew up reading fairy tales from all over the world—Grimm's fairy tales had a whiff of Europe; the haunting, deeply affecting tales of Hans Christian Andersen had a Nordic feel. Russian fairy tales came in beautifully illustrated Soviet books. Then there were the stories of my own land, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Grandma's

bag of stories).

Now blaming Disney for leaching a fairy tale of its cultural essence is a bit pointless, like getting angry at a shark for chopping your arm off. It's just the nature of the beast.

Disney's goal is to create a product that will appeal to the maximum number of people in maximum number of places. Cultural nuance gets short shrift, and we end up with bland, homogenised cultural artefacts like *Aladdin*.

Not that Disney really cares. Why should it? The cash registers are ringing all over the

world, and this is just the beginning. Expect a mind-boggling array of spin-offs to augment its bottom line—children's books, toys, costumes and last but not definitely the least, an Aladdin-themed ride in its amusement parks all over the world.

What's so depressing about it all is that diversity is as vital a need in culture as it is in ecology: a monoculture of the mind is asphyxiating for the spirit.

I am now less inclined to be sympathetic to the crisis affecting America's movie theatres. People are deserting cinemas in droves as streaming entertainment has become the new thing. Consider the hullabaloo over the Oscar-winning Mexican film *Roma* last year. The movie was produced by the streaming giant Netflix. Hollywood studios were livid, because streaming services like Netflix were eating their lunch.

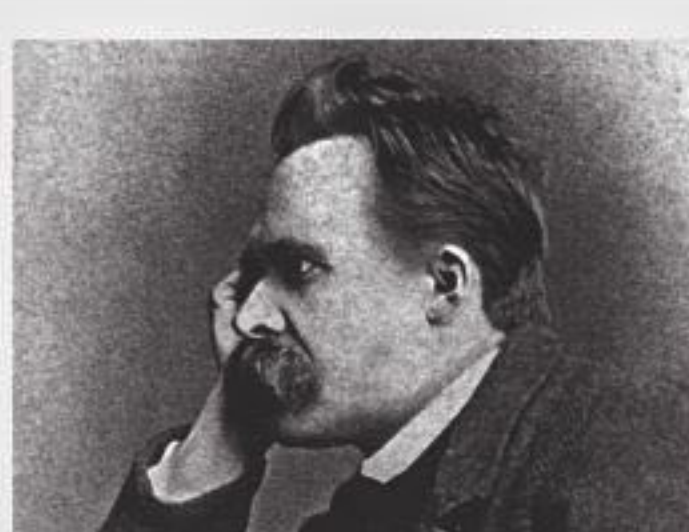
Maybe that's not such a bad thing. As surely as summer brings along sunny days in the US, it brings with it a slew of fantastic, action-hero movies which have very little artistic or cerebral appeal to me.

Streaming services, it turns out, work on a different model. Instead of being obliged to dumb down their product to appeal to the maximum number of viewers, it can be selective and still manage to appeal to a huge cohort of discerning movie buffs. This allows it to be nimbler, and the results can be stunning.

This was brought home to me recently when I saw *Photograph*, an exquisite gem of a film starring the wonderful Nawazuddin Sheikh, and directed by Ritesh Batra, who also directed *The Lunchbox*, another gem. With Chekhovian grace, the film offers a deeply nuanced portrayal of an improbable love story that brings alive the diversity of Mumbai with exquisite grace. No surprise: It was produced by Amazon.

Can a culturally tethered, nuanced fairy tale movie be too far away? I wait with bated breath.

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



**QUOTABLE**  
*Quote*

**FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE**  
GERMAN PHILOSOPHER, CULTURAL CRITIC AND PHILOLOGIST

*Injustice and filth they throw after the lonely one: but, my brother, if you would be a star, you must not shine less for them because of that.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

1 Dove's desire

6 Diploma holders

11 Include

12 Spinetling

13 HYbrid garment

15 Pointer

16 Lamb's dad

17 Museum focus

18 Stag's rack

20 Fish eggs

21 Snaky fish

22 Tooth-paste buy

23 Worries

26 Pet store buys

27 Puts down

28 Maximum amount

29 Broad st.

30 Rise gradually

34 Even score

35 Bond rating

Brian

37 Hybrid garment

40 African antelope

41 Bert's buddy

42 Thin coins

43 Takes it easy

**DOWN**

1 Lasagna or

linguine

2 Moses of the track

3 Skilled

4 Spying org.

5 Menu choices

6 Disinfectant's target

7 Gun, as a motor

8 Partial floor cover

9 Strip

10 Some sofas

14 Rank above

viscount

19 "Why don't we!"

22 Story

23 Truck type

24 Trattoria dish

25 Test with letters

26 Less cloudy

28 Mecca resident

30 Deck units

31 Hammer ends

32 Ill-suited

33 Does some

modeling

38 Hydrocarbon

39 Hot blood

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO [dsopinion@gmail.com](mailto:dsopinion@gmail.com).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43

6-18

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

N	A	C	H	O	A	C	T	S	
A	B	R	A	M	B	A	R	E	S
S	A	U	D	I	O	L	I	V	E
T	S	E	G	A	M	P	I	N	
Y	E	L	L	O	B	E	L	L	S
		O	S	E	R	E	L	O	
P	I	T	C	H	V	A	D	E	R
A	R	E	A	T	I	S			
Y	E	L	L	O	B	E	L	L	Y
E	L	S	N	O	R	L	I	E	
R	A	T	E	S	A	B	A	B	A
S	N	A	R	E	T	O	M	E	S
D	R	A	T	E	X	A	L	T	

**BEETLE BAILEY**

by Mort Walker

WHAT'S WRONG?

I'M TRYING TO CALL HOME BUT SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH THE PHONE

IT'S BUSY

GREG! MORT WALKER

HELLO, BUSY!

**BABY BLUES**

by Kirkman & Scott

SIGH! I FEEL SO OLD AND WINKLY.

WELL, I THINK YOU'RE AS BEAUTIFUL AND SEXY AS THE DAY I MET YOU.

REALLY?

ABSOLUTELY.

EVEN AFTER I SHOW YOU THE POLYGRAPH APP ON MY PHONE?

HEAVENS TO BETSY! LOOK AT THE TIME!