

86TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF ZAHIR RAIHAN

Zahir Raihan and the making of Jibon Thekey Neyya



NAZNIN TITHI

BEING someone who is keen on watching films that were made on our Liberation War in the early seventies—and the films that made an impact on our nation's movement for freedom—for me, Zahir Raihan is a legend. And whenever

there is any discussion on Zahir Raihan—who had an unparalleled passion for films and documentaries alike—I make it a point to talk about Jibon Thekey Neyya. As an ordinary viewer, I think this particular film was meant for all the people of Bangladesh. Such is this film's speciality.

When Jibon Thekey Neyya, the last feature film directed by this legendary filmmaker, was released on April 10, 1970, it took the whole of East Pakistan by storm. The people of East Pakistan knew beforehand that a film was being made which spoke of their story, their struggles, and their dreams. They had a feeling that the film might not get clearance from the censor board and so they brought out a procession protesting any such move. Finally, the film was released. But on the day of its release, the then military government banned it. The next day, the censor board again arranged for its screening, where Major General Rao Forman Ali himself was present and watched the whole film. Although the film got clearance from the censor board after the screening, Rao Forman Ali warned Zahir Raihan, "... I will see you."

Why this warning? The film narrates the story of a middle class family headed by an autocratic elder sister. Other members include her two younger brothers and her husband. But nobody in the family has a say in any

matter of the household and everything is decided by the elder sister. Her husband is not even allowed to sing inside the house. In such a suffocating environment, to end her autocratic rule, the two brothers get married hoping that their elder sister would not be able to dictate everything in the family anymore. The members of the family paste posters on the wall against her dictatorship. In the end, the oppressed members win and the autocratic elder sister lands in jail. Although it seems like the ordinary story



Zahir Raihan

of a family, it symbolises the dictatorial regimes of Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan. The whole family's struggle against one woman symbolises the struggle of the people of then East Pakistan. The film drew inspiration from the Language Movement of 1952 and

the mass uprising of 1969. Our Language Movement had always been a source of inspiration for Zahir Raihan. He was among the first ten students of Dhaka University to break Section 144 on February 21, 1952 and was jailed for his role in the Language Movement. Raihan planned to make a film on the movement, but could not get the government's approval. In Jibon Thekey Neyya, Zahir Raihan kept scenes of Probhat Pheri on February 21; the protagonists of the film were seen observing Ekushey February. The

East Pakistan, was actually made in 1969, the year of the mass uprising. During the shooting of the film in FDC, some army men came to the spot. They said they heard an anti-Pakistan film was being made by Zahir Raihan. They picked up Raihan and actor Razzak for interrogation, and only let them go after Raihan signed a bond which said if the law and order situation in the country deteriorates after the film's release, Zahir Raihan would be held accountable. A film like Jibon Thekey Neyya was a big

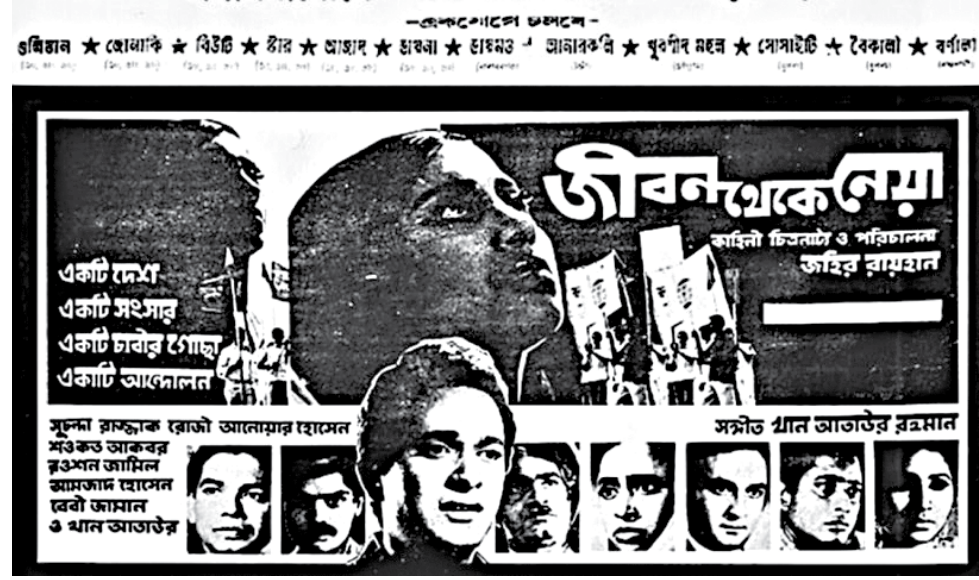
huge success and got Zahir Raihan international recognition. But he wanted to move away from making popular and commercially successful films and wished to make political films instead. This came about with Jibon Thekey Neyya.

He made it in a way so that ordinary people could easily relate to the story. Amzad Hossain and Zahir Raihan jointly wrote the screenplay. Afzal Chowdhury did the cinematography, while Khan Ataur Rahman gave the music direction. The combination of the four was extraordinary and thus, we got an extraordinary film. During our Liberation War, this film was a hit in Kolkata and had earned a lot of money, all of which Zahir Raihan donated to the Liberation War fund.

Ask any ordinary person to name a film from the 1970s that they remember watching; the answer would definitely be Jibon Thekey Neyya. I remember watching this film with my parents when I was a child. I particularly loved the song Ey Khacha Bhangbo Ami Kemon Korey, which Khan Ataur Rahman sings a number of times in the film but is never able to finish singing. Khan Ataur Rahman later said that the song was never finished in the film because people's struggle to break free from the shackles of oppression never ends—it's a continuous process.

This is also true for Zahir Raihan, who, in his short lifetime, struggled continuously for realising his dreams. He struggled through his films and writings. He struggled for a country where there would be no place for war criminals. He was the first person after our independence to form a commission to investigate the killings of intellectuals. His lifelong struggle ended with his disappearance on January 30, 1972.

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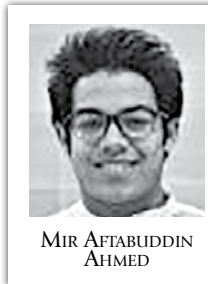
Poster for Jibon Thekey Neyya (1970).

political consciousness of the characters in the film encouraged, and added to, the nationalist movement of that time.

I still find it hard to believe that this film, which challenged state power and echoed the hopes and aspirations of the people of then

challenge for Raihan in every aspect of its making. Prior to this, he had made quite a number of feature films among which were Kokhono Asheni, Kacher Deyal, Behula, Anowara, etc. All of these were much acclaimed by film critics. Kacher Deyal was a

Why is Trudeau taking Canada to the polls?



MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

IN a bid to secure a parliamentary majority and strengthen his position as Canada's principal political architect, a confident Justin Trudeau is taking his country to the voting stations on September 20 this year. On August 15,

Trudeau met with Governor General Mary Simon—the representative of Canada's Head of State Queen Elizabeth II—and advised her to dissolve parliament. This commenced a month-long period of election campaigning amidst what health experts are terming a fourth wave—with an increasing prevalence of the Delta variant. One may ask—why now? The answer is pretty simple: timing.

The scheduling of the elections is pitch-perfect for Trudeau to attain the consent of his electorate to govern and to acquire the elusive parliamentary majority that he is enthusiastically looking to get—the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) predicts Trudeau's party to attain roughly 35 percent of the national vote, followed by the Conservative Party trailing at 29 percent. The centre-left Liberals have been leading the country in a minority government for the past couple of years—meaning Trudeau's legislative schemas are often based on his party's cooperation with other actors, such as the left-leaning New Democratic Party (NDP). Following the 2019 elections, Trudeau lost significant footing in parliament—with 33.12 percent of total votes, the Liberals had formed a single-party minority government with the lowest vote share for any party in power in Canadian history. In fact, they lost the popular vote, meaning more Canadians voted in favour of a Conservative government and for ousting Trudeau from office.

Nevertheless, Canada's electoral system dictated otherwise—the candidate with most votes in an electoral riding wins a seat in the House of Commons or the Canadian

Parliament, representing that riding as its MP. Essentially, the Liberals had more elected MPs in parliament, even though the total votes cast for the party were lower than that for their primary opponents, the Conservatives. In a nutshell, Trudeau today is looking towards voters for an unambiguous and definitive mandate to govern—something which his party had from 2015 to 2019.

During the 2015 electoral campaign, Trudeau was marketed by his party as Prince Charming in a suit. Dashing, youthful, and

having a discontent yet agreeable electorate backing him.

Trudeau has made no secret of his ambitions for a bigger and bolder role for the federal government. His regime has taken a much broader systematic approach towards consolidating policy programmes that have traditionally been under the purview of provincial or regional governments—in many ways contradicting Canada's decentralised system of governance, termed "federalism". In fairness, this was an acknowledgement of the



Dashing, youthful, and apparent heir to his father Pierre Trudeau's legacy, Trudeau was deemed by the international media as the poster boy for Western liberalism.

PHOTO: AFP

need for immediate responses to counter the socio-political implications of the pandemic. However, Trudeau's increasingly authoritarian tendencies (as his opponents put it) have been widely criticised in regions where his party's political influence remains fragile—oil-rich Alberta and francophone Quebec continue acting as his primary Achilles' heel. As expected, the pandemic recovery plan moved beyond the realms of traditional policymaking and included a Liberal agenda, which saw large-scale investments in social safety nets—stimulus packages in the form of CAD 2000 monthly Canadian Emergency

Response Benefit (CERB) payments to the population were, to Trudeau's credit, widely applauded across the country. The long-term implications on the Canadian balance sheet are, however, a cause for concern. It took the country over 150 years since its inception to amass a national debt of USD 721.4 billion, and one year after the pandemic, that debt burden grew by a staggering 66 percent. While the federal government's mass vaccination campaign and procurement strategy have been hotly debated, it is Trudeau's prerogative to claim that he has managed enough vaccines for each and every individual in Canada. More than 71 percent of eligible Canadians are fully vaccinated, with over 82 percent receiving at least one dose. An extended lockdown in varying forms over the past year and a half, which stifled small businesses and decelerated economic activity, has finally been lifted across all parts of the country. Even though provincial governments had the final say in deciding mobility restrictions, the message from the top has been to vaccinate first and open up later. Therefore, the government's handling of the pandemic has been deemed a relative success by observers, giving Trudeau the chance to seek a stronger mandate from voters.

Canadians need to choose how we finish the fight against Covid-19," was the central message provided by the PM when asked why he was taking his nation to the polls within such a short period of time. It is true to an extent that Trudeau's promises are in many ways radical. His government propped up environmental policy plans by aiming to eliminate all combustible engine-run cars and light trucks by 2035. He wants to carry home the call for a tobacco-free Canada, also by 2035. These programmes are, in fairness, not in sync with the kind of political programmes that the opposition, particularly the Conservative Party, have been constructing in the past decade. Therefore, it is safe to say that Trudeau has a convincing argument in calling for early elections. The people have witnessed the political philosophy of the Liberals. Therefore, voters should have the opportunity of providing their consent, or lack thereof, for

the direction Canada will take in the post-pandemic world.

The story does not end there. Trudeau's tenure has witnessed his previous pick for Governor-General, Julie Payette, put the Canadian government at the heart of a workplace harassment scandal. Accusations of sexual abuse against the military leadership were sidelined by the PM's Office. As a result, Trudeau faced heat from local media. He was obliged to oversee a period where Canada was put to shame over the discovery of mass graves of indigenous people across the country—increasing existing tensions regarding land rights, water access, and the very idea of reconciliation between indigenous groups and government agencies. Internationally, Canada's diplomatic ties with China, USA and Saudi Arabia have faced a myriad of economic and political challenges. Therefore, to suggest that all is well for Trudeau would be inaccurate. His insistence on tapping into a federal carbon pricing policy—in line with his macroeconomic aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent by 2030, and to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050—is not popular amongst many of voters whose support he desperately needs in order to attain his prized majority.

Nevertheless, Trudeau has achieved a stoic reputation of investing towards realistic stated interventions to support the Canadian middle class. The establishment of a national childcare plan, with the aim of decreasing costs for parents down to CAD 10/day per child within five years, forms a key segment of his electoral manifesto. Resonating with new immigrants, people of colour and traditional Liberal voters, such programmes continue making Trudeau Canada's strongest candidate for the post of prime minister. His primary challenge will be to ensure that these voters are not swayed towards the rising NDP. The fundamental argument is that Liberals will push for stability—and stability in uncertain times is, without a doubt, a lucrative option for voters.

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