

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

# Analysing South Asian history through films

**I could not resist reading Lotte Hoek's argumentative piece, "Cross-Wing Filmmaking: East Pakistani Urdu Films and Their Traces in the Bangladesh Film Archive". Hoek investigates dominant national trends into forgotten archives of film practice. She takes *Son of Pakistan*, better known as *President* (1966), as a sample film—said to be the first children's film of Pakistan, the story is based on Rabeya Khatun's novel *Dusshahoshik Abhijan*.**

PRIYANKA CHOWDHURY

Critical reading of South Asian history has been majorly subjected to individual narratives. Lack of comparative studies have resulted in ignorance for neighbours and a forgotten history of self. Unlike most academic, information-heavy writings that I have come across, *South Asian FilmScope: Transregional Encounters* offers opportunities for analytical reasoning and provokes the mind to wander. While some chapters offer new information, others offer varied perspectives on known history, and suggest innovative ways of challenging hegemonic paradigms.

Editors and co-founders of the South Asian Regional Media Scholars Network (SARMSNet), Elora Halim Chowdhury and Esha Neogi De, have meticulously designed the book. They have distributed the chapters of their debut publication equally among the tri-nations—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, intertwining their history and culture even to the ignorant eye. The selected essays compel the reader to look beyond the contents of the book and trigger an urge to explore, from chapters on "Nations and Regional Margin", to "Transregional Crossing" and "Fractured Geographies, South Connectivities".

I could not resist reading Lotte Hoek's argumentative piece, "Cross-Wing Filmmaking: East Pakistani Urdu Films and Their Traces in the Bangladesh Film Archive". Hoek investigates dominant national trends into forgotten archives of film practice. She takes *Son of Pakistan*, better known as *President* (1966), as a sample film—said to be the first children's film of Pakistan, the story is based on Rabeya Khatun's novel *Dusshahoshik Abhijan*. But taking a stance away from a romantic or nationalistic position, Hoek confronts the people in charge directly. Along with archived materials, she notes body gestures and choices of words of her interviewees, Faridur Reza Sagar and Dr Fazlul Alam. She used statements of the Film Archive Librarian, the Film Investigator, an unnamed person she referred as a friend, and Zakir Hossain Raju in regard to her search for the documentation of Urdu films in Bangladesh Film Archive. She infers the failure of this search as a representative of the actively forgotten history of the Urdu films of East Pakistan.

The 'film investigator' (as Hoek states) working in Bangladesh Film Archive blatantly admits that the archive has not been able to add Bangla language magazines from before 1978 (the year of the establishment of the institution). The mention of the years such as 1971, 1975, and 1978 signify times in history which have been important in forming the identity of Bangladesh. The oral histories and myth, reminiscences and documents, all sum up the structure of the created identity of Bangladesh.

Digging deeper, I could see myself walk through the shelves of the Film Archive as I read the book. While Hoek tries to pin the

language used in the film, the protagonist, played by Faridur Reza Sagar, told Hoek that he couldn't recall anything about the making of the film. I was taken aback because he has mentioned the film in multiple conversations in local media and has written about it. His essay, titled, "Ami President er nayok bolchi", which loosely translates to "I, the hero of President", was published in *Kishorsomogro*, volume 1 and later added to a memoir, *Aragami Swapnik* (2016). The memoir was about the director Fazlul Huq. In it, he recalls travelling to Karachi, Lahore, Pindi, Islamabad, Peshawar, and Swat, besides shooting the film in the East. He also shared anecdotes and details of the storyline but there was no mention of the language of the film. Among other writings in the memoir, veteran actress Nasima Khan reminisced her acquaintance with the director. She worked in the Urdu film *Azan* during 1962 to 1963, which was much later released as *Uttoron*, another film by

of Bangladesh" by Glen Hill and Kabita Chakma.

Unlike Lotte Hoek's nonlinear approach, here the writers walk us through the trail of incidents that form the map of Chittagong Hill Tracts and the history of its people—concepts of freedom, dominance, inclusion and exclusion. While Hoek talks about the act of "othering" between the speakers of Urdu and Bangla, Hill and Chakma present the "othering" of non-Bangla speaking minorities by the dominating Bangla speakers and its projection on screen. The two writings form a diptych; a daunting task that many have failed to compile. They also preserve works of the indigenous diasporic community who are helping to promote their culture to a larger audience.

I was, however, surprised to not find mention of the Hill Film Festival in the chapter. The festival has been running in Bangladesh since 2014. One of the key figures of the festival, Audit Dewan, was



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

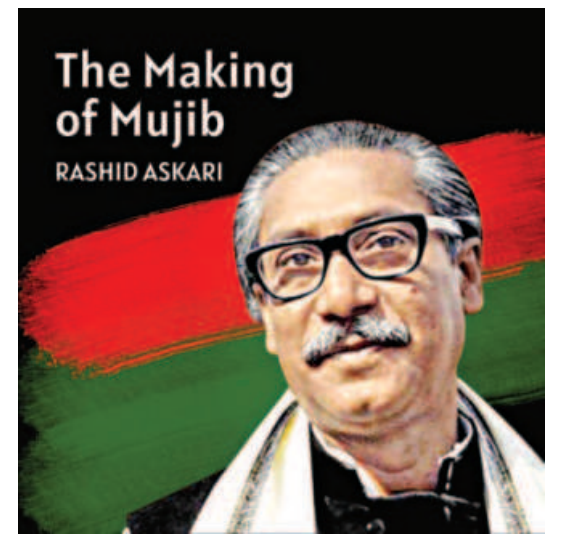
the same director. Nasima Khan mentioned *Son of Pakistan* being an Urdu film, the first one for children made in Pakistan. She refers to the director as a "brave one" from East Pakistan who proved that Bengali directors were capable of making all kinds of movies in any language. She also credited him for paving the path for future directors of Bengal. This was the moment I was bewildered by these contrasting narratives and thereafter, I was only left to wonder if it could unveil any lead on Lotte Hoek's search. South Asian FilmScope is, therefore, a journey to the centre of the unanswered questions we ask as film students. Some of these questions lead to answers and some push for further research. Either way, this book is helpful beyond the academic realm. Although the book remains unbiased to the territories, my reading interest primarily leaned towards Bangladesh. And so another important chapter to me was "Silencing Films from the Chittagong Hill Tracts: Indigenous Cinema's Challenge to the Imagined Cultural Homogeneity"

mentioned as a director but his initiative of the festival was excluded. I believe festival initiatives are a strong media of communication and it is worthwhile to be included in future editions of the book.

This edition ends with a hopeful reading by Elora Halim Chowdhury, where she looks at friendship and healing in contemporary films about the Bangladesh Liberation War.

She analyses national films inquiring how it may document and engender a conversation about nation, history, identity, healing and reconciliation. Looking through the lens of both female and male directors, she studies three contemporary films, *Shongram 71* (2014), *Itihaash Konna 1*, and *Meherjaan*. She believes that the films chime in to the creation of an alternative archive of 1971 with complex and diverse gender representation and the possibilities of healing and reconciliation through intimate and interpersonal relations.

Priyanka Chowdhury is an art researcher and writer in the making. Email: priyanka.chowdhury@gmail.com.



COLLAGE: SARAH ANJUM SARAH

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## An intellectual biography of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

MEHERUN NESA

*The Making of Mujib* (Bangla Academy Dhaka, 2022) by Dr Rashid Askari is an intellectual biography of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman aimed mainly at historiographers and socio-political scientists. Yet the linguistic intelligence of the book communicates with non-specialist audiences with equal eloquence.

Although quite a large number of biographies have been written about Mujib, none, says Dr Askari in the preface to his book, "evaluate his life and thought in the light of the political discourse concerning him". His book explores historical-political contexts in which Bangabandhu took solemn vows to stand against the Pakistani usurpers and address the interests and hopes of his people.

The writer attempts to develop the biography through the conceptual analysis of Mujib's motives and beliefs. As an intellectual historian, the writer offers insights into Mujib's life, the relationship between his life and political ideology, and his contribution to addressing the critical geo-political issues of the then-East Pakistan.

The diverse literature on Mujib has created many distinct images of this influential leader, which has led many researchers to attempt to unearth 'the real Mujib'. Rather than joining this quest to over-simplify Mujib's legacy, this biography explores a number of personae that Mujib assumed at different periods of his life. Dr Askari endeavours to unfold the sharp-minded, systematic thinker, and brilliant genius of Mujib's growth as a political giant in connection with his inseparable attachment with the socio-political and economic history of Bangladesh.

Three basic causes—decolonization,

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democratisation, and racial equality—were upheld by Mujib in his call for civil resistance, largely characterised by non-violence. Mujib used the phenomenon of non-violence against the Pakistani occupation to claim and establish autonomy in the region. His forms of actions included demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, and campaigns to reinstate peace and the constitutional order of the region. Askari reaffirms that in the formation of a political personality, Mujib nurtured his inborn passion and love for humanity.

A blending of enormous political insight and austerity made Mujib a sometimes difficult political figure. His strength was born in his morality and in his mysticism; he had to spend one fourth of his 54 years in jail. He was sent to jail 18 times and faced death twice. His firm conviction for justice and truth became the critical factor in motivating the oppressed people of the land. With his incantatory call to people in the historic speech of March 7, 1971, and his declaration of the Independence of Bangladesh, Mujib's people woke up to fight fire with fire, as Dr Askari records under the sections, "The Mighty Roar", "The Cruellest Crackdown", and "The Final Word".

The biography tells this story in eight chapters. They have small subsections to present facts, ideas, and views in small chunks. The text offers an accessible description of Mujib and his activities, along with analysis and commentaries of historiographers and news reporters on the Liberation War of Bangladesh. The use of intertextual instruments like translations, quotations, and allusions have helped the writer to examine his subject from multiple dimensions.

Dr Rashid Askari has been one of my heroes for his contribution to South Asian English fiction with his short story collection, *Nineteen Seventy-One and Other Stories* (Pathak Shamabesh, 2011). The book kept me up late, and continues to remind me of the transformative effects of a powerful narrative. Here, too, reading his work felt to me as though, as Nikolai Gumilev once put it, "Only serpents shed their skins forever/ So that their souls would age and grow. / We are not serpents, all that clever/ We change not our bodies, but our souls".

Meherun Nesa teaches English at Jagannath University, Bangladesh.

THE SHELF

## Wanderlust reading: Books for your vicarious travelling this summer

STAR BOOKS REPORT

**TOMB OF SAND**  
Geetanjali Shree, trans. Daisy Rockwell  
Penguin India, 2022

An 80-year-old North Indian plunges into despair as her husband passes away. As she comes back to her former self, despite her family's pleas she resolves to travel to Pakistan and face her troubled past of experiencing the Partition of India first hand. Her friendship with a transgender person further confounds her "bohemian" daughter.

Despite the grave themes of this year's International Booker Prize winner—the first Hindi language book to be shortlisted for the £50,000 prize—Geetanjali Shree writes her tale of discrimination and trauma with humour and lightness.

**MEGH PAHARER DESHE**  
Ishtiaq Alam  
Bengal Publications, 2022  
Ishtiaq Alam's collection of essays explores all the best spots to visit in Meghalaya and beyond to discover the 'Seven Sisters' states in Northeast India: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. Alam's

descriptions are lively and informative, and he divulges the rich history and the cultural richness of the places.

**MALLOBAN**  
Jibanananda Das  
Penguin India, 2022  
Set in North Calcutta in 1929, an "ordinary" lower-middle class man lives with his wife, Utpala, and daughter, Monu, in the neighbourhood of College Street. The

gender, and sexuality in the aftermath of the Swadeshi movement and the Partition of India in 1948. This is the first English translation of the novel.

**THE SLOW ROAD TO TEHRAN**  
Rebecca Lowe  
September Publishing, UK, 2022.  
Faced by severe weather and nature conditions, Rebecca Lowe rode off across the Middle East atop

**IMAGINE A CITY: A PILOT'S JOURNEY ACROSS THE URBAN WORLD**  
Mark Vanhoenacker  
Knopf, 2022

Another work of nonfiction in the list, in *Imagine A City*, its author Mark Vanhoenacker "weaves travelogue with memoir" to create "this intimate yet expansive work". He pays tribute to the cities he has traversed and come to fall in love with—places that thousands of people across the world have called home.

**SUPERPOWERS ON THE SHORE**  
Sejal Mehta  
India Viking, 2022  
The Indian coastline

is home to some of the most biologically diverse and wondrous creatures on Earth. "[m]agnificent intertidal species: solar-powered slugs, escape artist octopuses, venomous jellies", and such wander through the depths of the ocean. Sejal Mehta, in her book, outlines the rich diversity that stands toe-to-toe with the rich wildlife of the rainforests and ones that have given birth to countless works of fantasy and fiction.



eponymous protagonist finds himself distraught and arguing with his wife over seemingly insignificant matters like "bathrooms and budgeting" and even "the appearance of a frequent late-night visitor to Utpala's upstairs bedroom". Meanwhile, their daughter faces the consequences of this unrest. This third novel by Jibanananda Das unpacks the issues of class, caste,

her bicycle amidst the raging Syrian War and when the refugee crisis reached its height in 2015. She had to be rescued, several times, by the locals with nothing at her disposal but "a desire to learn more about this troubled region and its relationship with the West". *The Slow Road to Tehran* is Lowe's first hand account of her journey from Europe to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, the Gulf and finally to Iran.