Enforced disappearances and the onus of accountability

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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There are more reasons than one to feel happy about two news reports appearing weeks apart, though interrelated. And they have to do with enforced disappearance over the 15-plus years of the reviled Hasina regime.

The first I refer to is a statement from an ISPR representative at a press briefing on July 3, assuring the nation that the army would take legal action against any of its members if found to have been involved in enforced disappearances. The second I refer to are comments made a couple of weeks prior to the first referred news, at a press briefing of the United Nations Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances (UNWGEID) in June, as a part of the working group's final day of a four-day visit to Bangladesh.

The July assurance may be a reaction, appropriate by all means, to a very direct comment of the vice-chairperson of the UNWGEID, made at the June briefing, that if perpetrators remain in positions of authority, there can be no victim-centred prosecution. A related comment that also merits mention was made by a military rep in that briefing to the effect that the army was not involved in enforced disappearances—only a handful of individuals on deputation to the DGFI and Rab were to blame.

The issue of enforced and involuntary disappearances (EID) strikes a very painful chord among all but the most cold-hearted among us. There are two in the cabinet of the present administration who have personally suffered the consequences of enforced disappearances. Reportedly, a total of 629 persons were victims of enforced disappearance from 2007 to 2023. Since then, the bodies of 78 were recovered and 59 persons were released after abduction. And 73 were later shown to be arrested. The rest remains untraced.

What merits mention too is that a senior BNP leader has been a victim of EID. He disappeared from Dhaka and was found one fine morning in March 2015, loitering aimlessly in the vicinity of a police station in Shillong, in the Indian state of Assam. His case is shrouded in mystery.

It also merits repeating that EID tops the list of the worst forms of human rights violations alongside extrajudicial killings—something that the Hasina regime developed a penchant for. This issue has been highlighted regularly in reports emanating from various national and international rights bodies. Yet, more than hundreds have been victims of EID during the Awami League regime—consequence of acts perpetrated by government agencies.

Why the issue must be investigated thoroughly also is because of the likely involvement of forces outside of Bangladesh in the disappearances of Bangladeshis who suddenly materialised across the border in 2012, like one Sukhoranjan Bali. In fact, the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearance publicly announced that the Indian authority's involvement in Bangladesh's system of enforced disappearances is a matter of public record, as reported by this daily.

FILE ILLUSTRATION: **BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY**

Thus, in the process of holding to account the main *dramatis personae* of this horrendous act, one of the points that should be considered with due diligence is the one that has been articulated by the UNWGEID vice-chairperson, which is the nub of the issue. How can one expect proper justice if the perpetrators continue to remain in positions of authority?

And this is the core issue that the interim government has not been able to address fully yet. I believe there are other elements that are standing in the way of the interim government's efforts to "sanitise" the administration and cleanse it of the Awami League ghost.

But a far more sensitive yet important issue that should occupy our mind is the responsibility, culpability, and complicity of the top brasses of the civil and defence institutions in the operation and perpetuation of a despicable and inhuman system as the "Aynaghar" and enforced disappearances, which became a norm of the Hasina regime to deal with the dissenters and recalcitrants. Also, how did the leadership allow a serving officer to remain "disappeared" in violation of the relevant military acts and prevalent laws of the land? While one accepts that there might be grounds for military officers to be turned over to the law, justice demands that they be given the chance to defend themselves.

I believe that loyalty demanded of the superior officers up and down the line to call out for those who reposed their trust and faith in them. It is surprising that some of those directly responsible for EID and running Aynaghar are absconding, and no valid reason has come forth from the relevant authorities. In holding those responsible for EID, I believe that everyone up the chain of command should be asked to account for their action related to the disappearance of serving officers.

What one must also address is the need to redefine the tasks of the forces intelligence, a matter I have flagged several times, particularly in my article in *The Daily Star* on February 9, 2012, titled "DGFI's Lakshman Rekha." Making political use of the DGFI started very soon after the liberation. That practice has continued ever since, and it has now been accused of acts that compare with the acts of SAVAK, Cheka or the NKVD (secret police or intelligence agencies of a former Iranian regime and Soviet Russian, respectively).

One of the urgent tasks of the interim government is to identify the alleged culprits and the enablers of EIDs and "Aynaghar," dismantle their network, and ultimately bring them to justice. Until that is done, all talks about justice will turn out to be exactly that—all talks.

When cinema reflects a nation's unsettled soul

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The birth of a nation, particularly one forged in the crucible of war, often necessitates a foundational narrative—a simplified, heroic account that binds a disparate populace. For Bangladesh, that narrative is inextricably linked to its bloody liberation from Pakistan in 1971. Yet, as the decades have passed, the once-unquestionable contours of this origin story have softened, blurred and, at times, been fiercely contested.

Perhaps like other war histories, our tumultuously toxic debate over our own past, including its many revisions, has been recounted in numerous books and literary works, particularly in Bangla. A range of authors, including those who fought in the Liberation War, contributed to it. In fact, this arduous, maybe even unresolvable, and certainly unfinished debate over our political history has shaped the nation's pernicious political journey in many ways. It reached another crimson crescendo merely 12 months ago.

But this piece is not about those debates. Rather, it reflects on a rare lens through which to view our war history: cinema, more specifically, through an essay by film-maker and researcher Naeem Mohaiemen. In a recent long-form essay for the academic journal *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, titled "A Looking Glass War: Bangladesh's Pendulum-swing Liberation War Cinema," Mohaiemen examines two films on the Liberation War, created 40 years apart. The essay highlights our societal understanding, shifting evaluations, and public responses.

Why does this matter, especially as a new generation of political leaders and power brokers prepare to assert their own versions of history? George Orwell's timeless warning from 1949 still resonates, "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past."

For my generation, growing up during the 1980s under the Ershad regime, local cinema largely failed to appeal to the urban middle class, who turned to Bollywood instead. Bangladeshi films primarily catered to rural and labouring audiences, offering a brief respite from daily hardship. Yet, Mohaiemen's essay reveals that our cinema has served as far more than mere entertainment. It has been a remarkably sensitive barometer of the nation's shifting self-perception, charting what he calls a "pendulum swing" in national identity that oscillates between secular, linguistic aspirations and a complex, resurgent religious piety.

Mohaiemen's astute reflections on Bangladeshi war films offer a compelling lens through which to examine this deep, often painful, negotiation of history, memory, and the very soul of a people. It is no surprise that Mohaiemen, who explored the idea of "correct history" in a 2014 book and through numerous essays over the years, would return once again to re-examine the past, this time through the lens of our Liberation War films, comparing them with post-1947 cinematic treatments in India and Pakistan.

In his characteristic diligence and style, Mohaiemen delves deeply into a subject that may have been explored before, including by other South Asian scholars, but rarely through our own big screens. He references films and artworks that many ordinary people, myself included, may not have seen but can now discover.

FILE VISUAL: **SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON**

Naeem Mohaiemen's cinematic pendulum

In the immediate aftermath of independence, the newly sovereign Bangladeshi state embarked on a state-sponsored cultural endeavour, crucial for consolidating national identity, and found a powerful ally in cinema. Films from this era, such as Chashi Nazrul Islam's remarkably swift 1972 release *Ora Egaro Jon* (They Are Eleven), served as artistic tools of ideological reinforcement.

The narrative was clear: the Pakistani military and their local collaborators, the rajakars, were unequivocally evil. Their depravity was often underscored by a caricatured depiction of piety. Characters adorned with prayer caps and pious exclamations became visual shorthand for treachery, their faith inextricably linked to forces seen as "primitive, anti-modern, annihilating, and anti-nationalist."

This cinematic framing served an explicit political purpose. By associating religious conservatism with the enemy, the post-war state sought to cement secular, linguistic nationalism as the bedrock of Bangladeshi identity. The events leading to the 1947 Partition, when Bangalee Muslims had championed a separate homeland based on shared faith, were quietly erased or sidelined.

The two decades of East Pakistan's existence, in which Bangalee Muslims struggled for recognition within a broader "Pakistani" framework, were omitted from these simplified cinematic retellings. Instead, the Bangla language emerged as the singular authentic marker of national belonging. Political actors of the time might argue that such simplification was necessary for a fledgling nation attempting to define itself in opposition to a traumatic past. But this narrative inevitably papered over deeper and more complex social undercurrents.

Women's portrayals in these early war films conformed to rigid, problematic templates. The Biranganas, brave women who endured sexual violence during the war, were valorised in state rhetoric, yet cinematically reduced to two archetypes: the endangered victim or the tragic martyr. In *Ora Egaro Jon*, scenes of sexual assault, while intended to shock, occasionally edged towards a voyeuristic gaze, reducing these women to their suffering.

The cinema, in such instances, reflected a society's discomfort with the moral injuries inflicted upon women to fully integrate their experiences into a triumphant national narrative without imposing a patriarchal resolution. While the war may have liberated the nation, its women were often left doubly shackled—first by violence, then by stigma.

A new millennium, a shifting lens

As Bangladesh entered the 21st century, a discernible shift occurred. The once-inviolable secular narrative began to fray—challenged by a global Islamist resurgence, waves of conservative rule at home, and an increasingly complex internal debate about national character. These ideological shifts inevitably found expression on screen.

In 2011, Rubaiyat Hossain's *Meherjaan* became a cinematic lightning rod, sparking fierce public debate and leading to its rapid removal from big screens. Its central premise, a consensual romance between a Bangalee woman and a Pakistani soldier, was an unthinkable betrayal of the national narrative, at least for many. Yet, as Mohaiemen compellingly argues, this controversial storyline was also a vehicle for a deeper re-evaluation of women's honour and agency in the aftermath of wartime violence.

Neela, one of *Meherjaan*'s protagonists and a rape survivor, stands in sharp contrast to her cinematic forebears. She does not succumb to suicide or silence. Instead, she refuses shame and actively seeks retribution, even joining female guerrillas. This shift was not spontaneous artistic invention but the product of decades of tireless feminist organising in Bangladesh—a slow but persistent dismantling of the patriarchal assumptions that long shaped how women's trauma was narrated.

The film captured a growing societal maturity, a readiness to see women not just as victims but as agents of resistance, with their own voices and choices. It signalled a society inching towards a more honest reckoning with the psychological and social aftermath of war, moving beyond binary portrayals of victimhood and valour.

Unresolved contradictions

The cinematic pendulum is not purely artistic, it reflects broader political and economic shifts. While early war films were often state-funded and ideologically guided, later productions like *Meherjaan* came from more independent, sometimes internationally oriented, creative spaces. Yet, even with increased public and private support for war films in recent decades, core contradictions remain unresolved: the role of religion in public life, the complexities of female experience in conflict, and the limits of acceptable narrative.

Bangladesh's progress since its birth, especially economically, is impressive. Yet, its path has also been marked by persistent debates over its foundational principles. As Mohaiemen's essay shows, the cinematic lens offers a uniquely intimate view into this ongoing struggle. It reveals a country that, while fiercely proud of its liberation, is still grappling with the full spectrum of its identity, shifting from simplified heroes and villains towards a more complex—at times uncomfortable—reckoning with the diverse forces that shaped its past and continue to define its present.

As the nation continues to evolve, so too will its cinema. It will remain a contradictory and contested "looking glass," reflecting the evolving contours of a nation still finding its true self, perpetually caught in the oscillation between memory, identity, and the relentless march of the contemporary.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Tests the weight of
6 Jazz bits
11 Cupid's missile
12 Flynn of films
13 Singer Cara
14 Plow pioneer
15 PC-linking system
16 Outback bird
18 TV's "Science Guy" Bill
19 Series-ending abbr.
20 Cowboy nickname
21 Beat walker
22 Showy flower
24 Hence
25 Asian nation
27 Fellow
29 High hits
32 Sought a seat
33 Deep hole
34 Plop down
35 French friend
36 That lady
37 Pot fill
38 Home in the country
40 Isolated
42 New York Harbor island
43 Greek sorceress
44 Roofing material
45 Concluded

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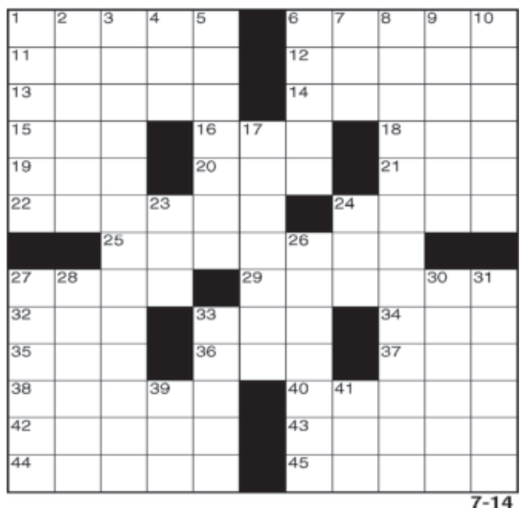
3 Ice cream choice
4 Cargo unit
5 Honey
6 Brought back
7 Hot blood
8 Tangy condiment
9 Gift giver's words
10 Sacks out
17 Cornish pasty, e.g.
23 Pert talk
24 Light touch
26 Zero evidence
27 Longs for
28 Mark of "Star Wars"
30 Use an awl
31 Put into words
33 Aspect
39 Tipsy
41 Sewing aid



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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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