

Understanding the cinema of convenient TRUTHS AND PERFECT PROPAGANDA

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Cinema has always been a mirror, but particularly in the last decade, it has started holding that mirror at a rather flattering angle. The reflection now has a bit more nationalism, a bit less nuance, and sometimes, an entire political manifesto playing in the background. The trailer for *The Taj Story*, which asks whether the Taj Mahal might once have been a temple, does not merely invite curiosity; it stages curiosity as corrective history. It is the newest actor in a growing ensemble of movies that treat doubt like doctrine and cinema like a courthouse. And while we once saw filmmakers wrestle with moral ambiguity, in present times, the only ambiguity lies in whether you are watching entertainment or an election campaign.

The easiest way to spot propaganda on screen is to notice who is being saved, and from whom. Every story needs a villain, and Bollywood has made an art out of villainising entire communities, ideologies, or centuries of history. In films like *The Kashmir Files* or *The Kerala Story*, the narrative is not satisfied with exploring tragedy as it must assign guilt, draw blood, and wave a flag while doing it. They claim to be based on true story, but so do most fairy tales. The truth, in such cases, is less about facts and more about feelings; the kind of feelings that make people clap in theatres and seethe on social media. The packaging, of course, is patriotic. Consider *Madras Cafe*. Ostensibly a political thriller about India's covert dealings in Sri Lanka, it wore the researcher's coat and won praise for restraint, even as Tamil groups accused it of caricaturing insurgents and reconstituting complex violence into tidy patriotism. The film worked because it largely respected cinematic

craft; its danger was not crude lies but selective emphases and excisions that made certain conclusions feel inevitable.

Then there are films that are less coy but more effective because they are emotionally dexterous. *Rang De Basanti* organised youth outrage into a cinematic narrative that made civic anger feel heroic and performative; its impact spilled beyond screens into public marches and moral conversation about corruption. The film did not spoonfeed doctrine; it anthropomorphised a political awakening, which made its persuasion

feel like a personal epiphany rather than an instruction manual. That is the point: persuasion that feels volunteered is far harder to interrogate. Some movies wear national pride like a coat of arms. For example, *Uri: The Surgical Strike* refused to call itself propaganda; it called itself inspirational.

Hindi cinema has plenty of nuanced cases that complicate the binary of propaganda versus art. *Raajneeti* staged politics as Greek tragedy: the family becomes a state, and vice versa, inviting viewers to see corruption as spectacle rather

than policy. *Madras Cafe* posed ambiguity while still attracting heat for its representation. The lesson here is that subtlety is not the absence of intent.

For decades, powerful states have used cinema as soft power, and Hollywood practically wrote the manual. During World War II, American studios churned out films glorifying the Allied cause, sometimes with the direct involvement of the Pentagon. *Top Gun* was so effective at boosting military recruitment that the US Navy famously set up booths outside theatres.

Even Bangladesh is not immune to this phenomenon. Recent biopics and documentaries about national leaders crystallise state narratives into celluloid hagiography. *Mujib: The Making of a Nation*, directed by Shyam Benegal and released amid carefully staged screenings and institutional promotion, was treated by many as a national event where memory management met mass entertainment. *Hasina: A Daughter's Tale* offers another, more intimate example of how documentary form can be used to consolidate personal and political

narratives.

The danger, however, is not only in what these films say but in what they simplify. The problem is that films love their countries. The problem is that they increasingly love their governments too. So, a film that questions authority is considered anti-national. One that flatters it is historic. Everyone gets the cinema they deserve, and lately, we seem to deserve lectures disguised as entertainment.

The line between art and propaganda is never just drawn by the artist, but by the one who pays for the paint. The more these films claim to speak truth to power, the clearer it becomes that they were funded by it. What used to be state censorship has evolved into state sponsorship. In some ways, it is more efficient because why would you ban what you can bankroll? A good propaganda film does not shout; it sentimentalises.

Of course, there is nothing new about political cinema. Art has always taken sides. But the best political films question power; propaganda films serve it. One challenge: the other comforts. And somewhere along the way, we stopped wanting to be challenged. We just wanted to feel righteous for two hours, and maybe buy popcorn with a discount coupon from a state-sponsored screening. The irony is that the most dangerous propaganda films rarely announce themselves as such. They arrive wrapped in tricolour, scored with swelling violins, insisting they are just showing the real story. Maybe *The Taj Story* will be another one of these, but the bigger story is not about any one film. It is about a cinema culture that increasingly confuses emotion for evidence and applause for truth. And while cinema may not rewrite history, it certainly reshapes it — in 4K, with patriotic subtitles.



NEWS

Youth killed in crude bomb explosion

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to Dhaka Medical College Hospital, where doctors declared him dead around 4:30am, said Inspector Md Faruk, in charge of the DMCH Police Camp.

Ujjal claimed Zahid was not part of the clash and had gone out with friends when he got caught in the violence.

Kazi Rafiq, officer-in-charge of Mohammadpur Police Station, said

they received information early in the morning about multiple crude bomb explosions. "We heard both versions of whether Zahid was hit on the rooftop or on the ground. We'll investigate and verify," he said, adding that a police team was dispatched immediately, but the situation had calmed down by then.

Meanwhile, Kallu, 28, a resident of a Mirpur Bihari camp, was injured while allegedly making crude

bombs at a house in Geneva Camp's Sector 7 yesterday afternoon, locals said, adding that he was receiving treatment at a private hospital.

OC Rafiq said additional forces have been deployed in the area to prevent further untoward incidents, adding that a drive to arrest the culprits in the camp began around 5:00pm and around 13 people were detained till the filing of this report at 12:30am.

Meantime, Kallu, 28, a resident of a Mirpur Bihari camp, was injured while allegedly making crude

Spatial Planning Ordinance, 2025.

The advisory council also approved a proposal to change the existing practices and procedures in the post-handover management of residential plots or flats developed by the Ministry of Housing and Public Works and various authorities or organisations under it, with the aim of simplifying services and eliminating corruption.

It also approved another proposal to set up Bangladesh's new Consulate General Office in Detroit, Michigan, USA.

Israel won't annex West Bank

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Gaza, as the Rafah border crossing remains shut despite the ceasefire deal, reports Al Jazeera online.

In a separate incident, at least two air attacks were conducted by Israeli army warplanes on the outskirts of Hermet, in the far north-eastern corner of Lebanon.

The Israeli army confirmed it carried out attacks, claiming without evidence that it targeted a production site for "precision missiles" owned by Hezbollah.

Israel has been carrying out regular attacks on Lebanon despite a nearly year-long ceasefire between it and Hezbollah. No casualties have so far been reported in these most recent strikes.

An organisation representing international media in Israel and the Palestinian territories expressed disappointment yesterday after Israel's top court postponed ruling on a petition to grant immediate access for foreign journalists to Gaza.

Since the Gaza war began in October 2023, Israeli authorities have prevented foreign journalists from entering the devastated territory, taking only a handful of reporters inside on tightly controlled visits alongside its troops.

Hand the highest punishment to Hasina

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Justice Md Golam Mortuza Mozumder said the verdict would be delivered after November 13.

Mozumder assured that justice would be delivered "fairly, transparently and beyond all questions".

"Even though some quarters will raise questions, it does not matter. We will not be swayed by who says what. Justice will be done at any cost -- for both sides," he said.

Referring to global precedents, Asaduzzaman said rulers elsewhere had been tried for crimes against humanity.

"We stand today to move Bangladesh towards a higher stage of civilisation. If we fail to deliver justice for these crimes, we shall remain symbols of cowardice to future generations."

He warned that acquitting the accused would embolden future

perpetrators.

Responding to critics questioning the fairness of the process, Asaduzzaman said: "Those who say these accused are not getting justice -- do you only want justice for the killers? Over 1,400 people were killed and around 30,000 others were wounded in 36 days. Don't they have the right to justice? Doesn't the state deserve justice?"

The absconding accused in the case was closely following the proceedings and issuing instructions to obstruct the trial, he said.

Chief Prosecutor Tajul Islam told the tribunal that the accused had shown no remorse and instead threatened witnesses that they would destroy their homes, dump their bodies in the Bay of Bengal and sow divisions among state institutions.

"They even tried to provoke the army, asking, 'Why aren't you standing up when your officers are

being tried?' -- attempting to incite a civil war. But Bangladesh's patriotic army and people did not fall into that trap."

Referring to the state-appointed defence lawyer Md Amir Hossain's claim that the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act lacks the provisions of the Evidence Act and the Code of Criminal Procedure, Tajul said the ICT Act was a special law enacted because no other legislation in Bangladesh had jurisdiction to try such crimes.

"The act is protected by the constitution and was later amended to align with international standards. It is now fully compatible with the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court," he said.

At this stage, the tribunal chair cautioned against remarks undermining the justice system.

"I too want justice, and I believe my clients will be acquitted if justice is ensured," Hossain told the court.

Govt okays draft to free the judiciary

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Adviser Asif Nazrul said that there was a long discussion on the draft of the ordinance.

"Some issues still need further discussion -- especially since the ordinance involves financial aspects, the opinion of the finance adviser is necessary, but it was not taken during the drafting process. Besides, there is also a need to consult with the Ministry of Public Administration."

Asif Nazrul said, "We have been talking about the separation of the

judiciary for about 25 to 30 years. Around 2006 there was a good attempt, but it was not possible to make the law."

On November 1, 2007, the Supreme Court cleared the way for the separation of the judiciary from the executive in its judgement in the Masdar Hossain case (Civil Appeal No. 79/1999), upholding article 22 of the constitution.

Draft ordinances previously approved in principle include the Anti-Corruption Commission (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025, the July Uprising Memorial Museum Ordinance, 2025; and the

Spatial Planning Ordinance, 2025. The advisory council also approved a proposal to change the existing practices and procedures in the post-handover management of residential plots or flats developed by the Ministry of Housing and Public Works and various authorities or organisations under it, with the aim of simplifying services and eliminating corruption.

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Debapriya deplores

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that the interim government has carried out some reforms and left others undone. "The country will remain, the people will remain, and so reforms must continue."

To this end, Debapriya believes it's crucial that the new government maintains this continuity. "We urge political parties to recognise this issue and reflect it in their manifestos."

He said politicians are now facing citizens and acknowledging past failures. "We expect them to act on the

promises they make to the people."

Debapriya further said reforms are indispensable to building a new Bangladesh and moving the country to a middle income status. "To break the anti-reform coalition that has formed, planned initiatives will be necessary."

The programme was attended by leaders from political parties, including BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, Communist Party, and NCP, alongside representatives of civil society and professionals.

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2 CCC officials suspended over fraud

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some employees, more officials may be involved, and the container depots themselves are the beneficiaries of this "criminal offence."

According to sources in the ACC, the 2016-2017 holding tax of the two container depots -- Eshak Brothers Industries Limited and Incontrade Limited -- was assessed at Tk 26.38 crore and Tk 25.67 crore, respectively.

During the primary investigation, the ACC found evidence that employees in the CCC's Revenue Department fraudulently erased the first digit (2) from each figure, reducing the holding tax for the two depots to Tk 6.38 crore and Tk 5.67 crore.

Both companies denied any wrongdoing, and said the assessment figures themselves were questionable and that they had appealed to the CCC for reassessment several years ago.

CCC sources said the alleged fraud occurred during the appeal review board hearings for the 2017-18 financial year's tax assessments. The digit "2" was erased from the presentation forms before the hearings. Incontrade Limited's hearing was on December 24, 2020, and Eshak Brothers Industries

Limited's hearing was on June 13, 2021.

CCC's own investigation detected the tax irregularities, and they authorities suspended Tax Officer Nurul Alam and Deputy Tax Officer Joy Prakash Sen on Wednesday. Three accounts assistants -- Manzur Morshed, Rupshi Rani Dey, and Ahsan Ullah -- were also relieved of their duties, officials said.

Contacted, CCC CEO Sheikh Muhammad Towhidul Islam said they are cooperating fully with the ACC.

"The issue of irregularities regarding holding tax has already been discovered through an internal investigation. As soon as we received the probe report, we took punitive measures against those involved," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

He added that they handed over their report to the ACC for further investigation.

Md Saiful Islam, executive director of Incontrade Limited, said the issue dates back to the 2016-17 fiscal statement.

"At that time, we informed them [CCC] through our association that holding tax is determined based on the property, not on the financial statement," he said. "Later, they reassessed the property at

Tk 5 crore and demanded holding tax accordingly, which we again appealed.

"Following the appeal, the amount was reduced to Tk 58 lakh, and we paid 14.4 percent tax as per the revised assessment. We did not make any manipulations ourselves."

He said the allegation that the revenue amount was reduced through undue means is "completely baseless".

Ruhul Amin Shikder, general manager of Eshak Brothers, said his company's valuation was fixed at Tk 12 lakh in 2016, but in 2017, the CCC increased it to Tk 26 crore.

"We then appealed to the CCC to reduce the valuation, and the CCC authorities fixed it at Tk 6 crore. But that too was too high and we appealed again," he told The Daily Star.

According to him, the CCC fixed the valuation at Tk 2 crore in 2021. "I can't understand where these talks are coming from after so many years."

CCC Mayor Shahadat Hossain told The Daily Star last night that there would be no question if the holding tax were re-evaluated and reduced genuinely. "But the probe committee found tampering of documents. As soon as I received the report on October 19, I have ordered action against the accused officials."