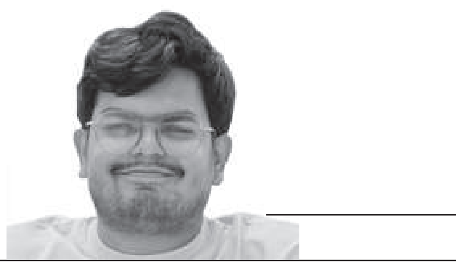
Beyond one cancelled film screening

How suppression of cultural freedom is normalised in Bangladesh



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JANNATUL NAYM PIEAL

On Saturday, a group of film enthusiasts in Brahmanbaria planned to do something entirely ordinary: watch a film together, discuss it, and go home. The film in question was *Bonolota Express*, a well-received Eid-ul-Fitr release directed by Tanim Noor, adapted from a novel by Humayun Ahmed. The venue was Annada Government High School. The organiser was Brahmanbaria Film Society, who had already run eight previous sessions of its "Bhatghumer Cinema Adda" series, steadily building a space for film culture and critical discussion in the district. The ninth screening should have been no different.

But it was not to be. The protest did not emerge spontaneously. It began with a social media post by a leader of a local right wing student organisation, who wrote that Brahmanbaria was "a city of Islamic scholars" where cinema had once been stopped, and demanded the administration ensure "the religious and social environment of Brahmanbaria remains intact." He circulated the film's poster marked with a red cross. The post gained traction and an organised campaign followed, with some even claiming the film's content to be "un-Islamic" despite the film's censor board clearance. On Friday evening, the deputy commissioner confirmed suspension of the screening because some people "were expressing various forms of anger," and allowing it the next day "would not be appropriate."

That statement deserves careful reading. The deputy commissioner did not say the screening was illegal. He did not say the film lacked certification or that the organisers had done anything wrong. His statement, in effect, handed authority over what is permissible not to the law, but to whoever is willing to be most vocally opposed.

Tanim Noor, who is from Brahmanbaria, responded with understandable frustration. He claimed that any film with censor board clearance can legally be screened anywhere in the country, and that marking a movie's poster with a cross and circulating it online is not a legitimate protest.

Strictly speaking, his claim on screening rights may sit uneasily with the existing law: the Cinematograph Act, 1918 requires exhibitions to take place only at licensed venues, and the Censorship of Films Act, 1963 further empowers the government to prescribe specific places where certified films may be shown.

But to dwell on this is to miss the point entirely. Brahmanbaria Film Society was not screening the film commercially. If this screening had gone ahead without incident, as the previous eight had, no one would have raised a word about venue certification. The legal question surfaced only because of the controversy. In this context, the school authority's role deserves scrutiny too. The organisers claimed preliminary consent from the headteacher of Annada Government High School. But the teacher denied that permission was granted and, instead, added that there was "no question of allowing film screenings at an educational institution."

One of these accounts is incorrect, and the truth matters. What is notable is the framing the headteacher chose: not that circumstances had changed, but a categorical statement that a school is simply not a place for cinema. Schools that host debates, theatre productions, and literary recitations have always also been places where films can be watched and discussed. To declare otherwise—in the middle of a politically charged controversy—is not a neutral administrative position. It is a concession dressed as a rule. Whether the school gave consent and withdrew it, or never gave it at all, the institution told its students something lasting: that principle bends under pressure, and that the surest way to get what you want is to generate enough unease that those in authority find reasons to step aside.

What happened next stripped away any remaining ambiguity. When filmmaker Adib Reza Rongon arranged a private village screening in Kasba on Saturday night, five to seven police vehicles reportedly arrived 15 minutes before it was due to begin and shut it down. When Rongon asked why, he claimed police termed the censor-certified film "obscene."

In recent years, this pattern has played out with dispiriting regularity. In June last year, the screening of *Taandob* in Kalihati, Tangail, lawfully permitted and paid for, was shut down after local groups protested through mosque loudspeakers, tore down posters, and submitted a petition. Police refused to intervene. In September 2024, music was banned at the Urus celebration at Shah Paran Mazar in Sylhet, not by government order but because the shrine's caretaker capitulated under threat. That November, the Lalon Fair in Narayanganj was cancelled after the district administration yielded to a local religious group. In February 2025, a Lalon commemoration in Madhupur was cancelled after religious groups declared the mystic saint's philosophy incompatible with Islam. In the same month, a crowd attacked a stall at Amar Ekushey Boi Mela over books by controversial author Taslima Nasreen. Then in April 2025, theatre group Prangonemor saw its production cancelled by a Dhaka auditorium after receiving a threatening letter—only restored after the then cultural affairs adviser intervened. This comes alongside the interim government's decision in November to scrap plans for music and physical education teachers in primary schools, following pressure from religion-based organisations.

One ought to acknowledge that this tendency of suppressing cultural expression has a long history in Bangladesh, and Brahmanbaria bears some of its deepest scars. In March 2021, in protest of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit on the occasion of Bangladesh's 50th independence anniversary and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's birth centenary, activists of a religion-based right-wing group vandalised and torched Sur Samrat Alauddin Sangeetangon in Kumarshil. The music academy had been established in 1956 in memory of Ustad Alauddin Khan, the legendary classical musician born in the district. Students of religion-based schools had targeted the same academy in 2016 as well.

Both attacks occurred under the Awami League government, which chose accommodation over accountability in its relationship with some right wing organisations for much of its tenure. That history cannot serve as justification for what follows it. Bangladesh now has a government built on the aspirations of a generation that demanded accountability. It cannot be new only in some respects while remaining familiar in others, precisely where the pressure is greatest. And it should register, with some weight, that the city now being told cinema has no place in it is the same city where a music academy honouring one of the subcontinent's greatest musicians was burned to the ground—twice.

There is a quieter consequence that rarely gets discussed. Filmmakers, writers, musicians and artists across the country are watching—not calculating whether their work is legal or important, but whether it is worth navigating what might happen if the wrong people object, and whether institutions can be trusted to provide even basic support. Many will privately decide the answer is no. That decision will never be announced. It will simply result in work that is not made, and a cultural life that contracts a little more, each capitulation making the next campaign easier to mount, and the next institution quicker to fold.

Those opposing the screening were explicit in their desire to define Brahmanbaria's identity in narrow terms, framing cinema as incompatible with the character of the place. That is a territorial argument, not a theological one, made by a self-selected group on behalf of a population that was never consulted. The freedom to organise a film screening, in a school hall, of a legally certified film, without having it suspended because some people posted objections on social media, is not a complicated ask. It is a baseline. When the administration declines to protect that baseline, treating social media noise as sufficient grounds to suspend a film screening, it is not staying neutral. It is making a choice, with consequences that reach well beyond Brahmanbaria and well beyond one single Saturday afternoon.

VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

The RMG makers deserve fair business

RMG NOTES

Mostafiz Uddin
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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

For two decades, I have watched global fashion brands speak the language of responsible business conduct—human rights due diligence, living wages, supplier partnerships, climate transition, social compliance, transparency, and shared responsibility. As a Bangladeshi garment manufacturer, I have welcomed that language and believe in it, as do most serious manufacturers in the country.

But the contradiction at the heart of the global garment industry is that responsible business cannot be built on irresponsible purchasing. It is now 2026, and we are still seeing brands asking suppliers to work miracles by doing more with less. Brands ask suppliers to invest, document, audit, decarbonise, trace, report, and comply with more. At the same time, commercial teams continue to demand lower prices, shorter lead times, longer payment terms and greater flexibility. How can that be called a partnership?

A recent Public Eye and Clean Clothes Campaign report, titled "Squeezed Dry," reveals some solid numbers in line with what many Bangladeshi manufacturers have experienced for years. It found that major buyers continue to source standard cotton T-shirts at around $2-3 per piece, with unit prices below $1 still found in parts of the market. It also found that in 2025, the average EU import price for cotton T-shirts was $16 per kg, while imports from Bangladesh averaged about $13 per kg.

The most important finding in the report is that real prices (prices adjusted for inflation) have gone backwards. According to the report, EU buyers now pay roughly a quarter more in nominal terms for imported cotton T-shirts than they did 25 years ago. But after adjusting for inflation, they are actually paying around 30 percent less. Adjusted for global inflation, average sourcing prices have fallen by roughly half in real terms. No serious conversation about living wages, "responsible sourcing," or "just transition" can ignore these alarming pricing dynamics.

Bangladesh has become central to this model. The same report says 61 percent of T-shirts imported into the EU in 2025 were sewn in Bangladesh. This business has brought jobs, foreign exchange, and industrial growth—which we are proud of. Bangladesh's garment industry has changed millions of lives. But concentration around the lowest-cost production base also creates dependency. It gives buyers huge leverage. It means that a factory can be technically free to reject an order, but commercially unable to do so if it wants to keep lines running and workers employed. This is a huge power imbalance.

Manufacturers do not want charity from brands. We are asking buyers to recognise that a factory is more than a production unit at the end of a spreadsheet. It is a workplace that employs people, pays wages, and carries bank loans. It pays utility bills, invests in fire safety, wastewater treatment, certification, audits, training, energy efficiency, and compliance systems. If the price paid for the garment does not reflect those realities, then all the language of responsible business conduct goes out the window.

The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights require companies to avoid infringing the rights of others and address adverse impacts. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) guidance for the garment and footwear sector is clear that due diligence applies across supply chains. It is designed to help companies identify, prevent, mitigate, and account for adverse impacts linked to their operations, products, and business relationships. The OECD has also identified low wages as a major risk in garment supply chains. To be clear, purchasing practices are not separate from human rights. They are one of the main ways brands influence human rights outcomes.

If a buyer sets a target price that does not cover the cost of compliant production, that is not a neutral commercial decision. If a buyer negotiates after production has begun, delays payment, demands discounts, changes specifications late, or refuses to reflect wage increases in the free on board (FOB) price, those decisions have consequences. The pressure moves downwards and affects factory margins, production intensity, overtime, and wages.

Responsible business conduct is now a market access imperative for Bangladesh's manufacturers, not a voluntary aspiration, especially as we face LDC graduation, tighter global regulation, and new expectations under EU due diligence rules. But responsible business conduct cannot be one-sided. It cannot be imposed on suppliers while buyers retain the right to purchase in ways that make responsible conduct commercially impossible.

For a garment worker, the difference between responsible and irresponsible business is not a supplier code on a website. It is whether wages can support a decent life, overtime is manageable, work is safe, and the factory has enough margin to invest rather than survive from order to order. Poverty wages in global supply chains should not be a fact of life in 2026.

No brand can credibly speak about human rights while relying on prices that help lock poverty wages into the system. No retailer can credibly speak about sustainability while treating labour as the only flexible cost left in the chain. And no company can claim partnership while transferring risk downwards and keeping value upwards.

This is not an argument against competitiveness. We compete every day with China, Vietnam, India, Pakistan, Cambodia, and Turkey. But competition should not mean a race to the bottom. At the same time, fairness does not mean brands paying whatever suppliers ask. It means open costing and prices based on the real cost of responsible production. It means recognising wage increases, respecting agreed terms, and not using one country's economic vulnerabilities as a bargaining tool. It also means buyers accepting that sustainability has a cost.

Manufacturers in Bangladesh are not asking to be excused from responsibility. We are asking for responsibility to be shared honestly. We want to build better factories. We want skilled workers and stable orders. We want to invest in cleaner production and meet global standards. We want Bangladesh to be known not only for scale and price, but for quality, reliability, innovation, and decent work. But that future requires buyers to change, too.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
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12 Chilled
13 Bugs bugs him
14 Big books
15 Word on a bill
16 Penny prez
18 Quarterback Manning
19 Pitching stat
20 Walker, on a sign
21 Charged bit
22 Military alert status
24 Crumb carriers
25 Libya neighbor
27 Like an abyss
29 Jazz bands
32 Mess up
33 Suffer
34 Smelter supply
35 Contrived
36 Frilly wrap
37 Wee bit
38 Stage comment
40 Terra__
42 Mail, as payment
43 TV's DeGeneres
44 Grove makeup
45 Canary chow

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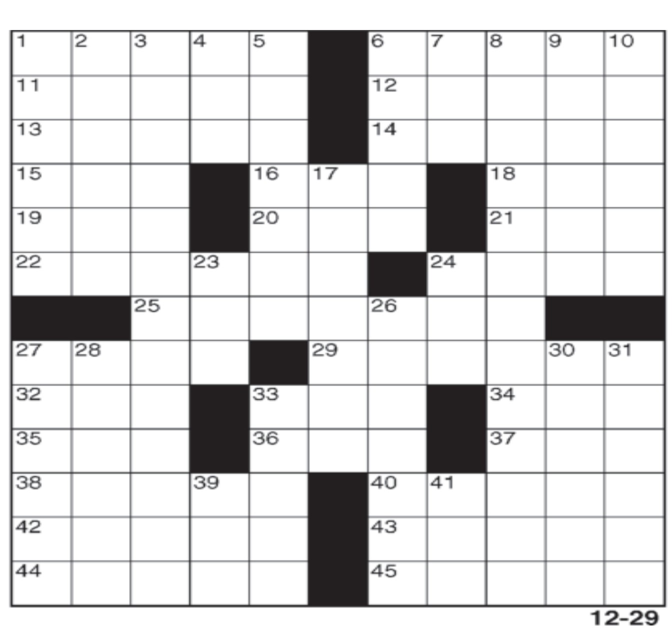
4 Sock part
5 Attach, in a way
6 Carried
7 One, for Juan
8 #1 hit for Jim Croce
9 Spotted cat
10 Lacquer ingredients
17 Del Toro of "The Usual Suspects"
23 Recipe unit
24 Target
26 Comforts
27 Head out
28 Classroom need
30 Gave addresses
31 Some autos
33 Aids illegally
39 Game cube
41 Bullring cry



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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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