

Festival Review
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Global Youth Film Festival: How a Boutique Film Festival Brought the World to Mymensingh



A small group of youngsters arrange a boutique film festival at different districts in Bangladesh every year. This year, in its third edition from September 5-7, this festival went to the banks of Brahmaputra in Mymensingh. Film-makers from Japan, India and Indonesia joined the young film-makers of Bangladesh to make this festival a success. 74 films from 35 countries were screened out of a total submission of 1700 films from 101 countries.

The chief guest at the inauguration was veteran thespian Ramendu Majumdar. At the closing ceremony, the chief guest was the city mayor of Mymensingh, Ekramul Haque Titu. Festival Coordinator, Asma Akhtar Liza, presided over the ceremony while the Festival Director and President of Cinema Bangladesh, Hemanta Sadeeq and General Secretary Jisan Mahadi emceed.

With the first edition held in Lakshmipur and the second edition in Rangpur, Global Youth Film Festival (GYFF) has proved time and again how important it

is to decentralize such events. Made by the youth and for the youth, the festival was again a celebration of cultures in an unlikely cocoon.



The Jury Board

The jury panel for the International Film category consisted of prominent Bangladeshi film-maker Mostofa Sarwar Farooki, Iranian film-maker Morteza Farshbarf and myself. Director Nurul Alam Atique, film academic Zahidur Rahman Anjan and architect Enamul Karim Nirjhar were the judges of the Bangladesh category.

The Films

Of the 74 national and international films screened at the festival, here are some of those that competed in the international section.

Etude (Animation), United States, 3.42M, Dir. Sarah Amburgey.

On her way home from studying, a young woman finds herself in front of a children's ballet studio where she encounters a little girl. Through this encounter, she remembers her past and revisits a world she thought she had lost forever.

Cycus (Animation), Thailand, 2.31M, Dir. Metinee Prayatkul.

Story of animal cruelty in circuses. Represented through a zoetrope, the film explores how the circus spreads happiness among the audience, but at the same time, the animals are constantly tortured during training.

Ray's Great Escape (Animation), China, 7M, Dir. Jie Weng.

Ray is a cute little monster who lives on the edge of a volcano that is about to erupt. Now he must relocate to survive. He undergoes massive hurdles to take away all his beloved objects. He transforms his wooden house into a small boat and embarks on an adventure into the unknown.

Flin (Animation), Ecuador, 2.53M, Dir. Catherine Valle.

The story follows a shark family playing in the ocean. The parent shark falls victim to poaching and the baby shark must learn to survive on its own.

No Name (Live Action), Turkey, 8.18M, Dir. Umut Can Yarıkan.

A man wears a mask all day, every day. Everyone around him does the same. He is his true self only when he is alone.

The Last Straw (Live Action), Malaysia, 9.39M, Dir. Aina Marlisa.

Mother Earth has been collecting plastic ever since mankind stopped caring for her. Does the rapid accumulation of such toxic waste break her or would it lead to her punishing her precious Earth?

The Screaming (Live Action), India, 14.13M, Dir. Kamal Paran.

Barnali, a teenager of fifteen years stays at her ancestral village home with her mother. Her mother longs every day to meet her husband who left the village to find some work in the city some ten years back and never returned. When Barnali goes to the city and misses the last bus back home, she falls victim to a group of malicious men, one of whom might be her father.

The Winners

The seven awards at the GYFF 19 went to films and film-makers from USA, Malaysia, China, Japan and Bangladesh. Best of the Fest award went to *Etude* (USA). In the international categories, Best International Short was won by *The Last Straw* (Malaysia), *Ray's Great Escape* (China) won Best Animation, and Best Documentary award was bagged by *Welcome to Tsunami Village* (Japan).

In the national categories, Hiralal Sen Best Bangladeshi Film awards went to *Koyekti Prachin Gachh* by Hasnat Sohan. Bijoy Mahmood won Tareque Masud Best Bangladeshi Director award for *Projonmo*. Ashish Khondker bagged Khalilullah Khan Best Bangladeshi Actor for *Tiyer Goppo*.

A Multicultural Environment

Apart from the filmmakers from India, Indonesia and Japan, other foreigners included volunteers from Afghanistan, Syria and Nepal. The small town seldom sees a multicultural gathering of this scale. Naturally, the locals were very enthusiastic about getting to know their new foreign friends. The foreign volunteers hardly had time to work with everyone swarming around them. Their shorts and short skirts weren't something Mymensingh residents witness often. Local volunteers were worried about their safety, always making sure to accompany them whenever they left the compound. World movies are also not widely available or popular in that area. So watching curated contemporary films and discussing with other audiences from home and abroad was a rare opportunity for many.

Workshop on a Boat

Even though we are the land of rivers, none of us had ever attended a class on a boat. Of the numerous classes organized by this festival, mine was on a boat on the river Brahmaputra. To avoid the scorching sun and its heat, we scheduled my screenwriting workshop in the late afternoon. It was the magic hour right before sunset. The autumn clouds cast mesmerising reflections and shadows on the water. The sky was fifty shades of purple. Every student appreciated the open-air class room. Who knew learning coupled with breath-taking natural surroundings could be so refreshing. The other workshop conductors of the festival included filmmaker Jasim Ahmed and writer Shadat Hossain.



Meanwhile at the Local Theatres

You can never know the local audience unless you visit the local theatres and watch films they bought tickets to watch. I went to two such theatres during this visit. Purobi cinema hall was playing the Kolkata film *Panther* starring Jeet. Chhayabani cinema hall was still playing Shakib Khan's Eid-al-Fitr film *Chittagonger Pola Noakhalir Maiya*. Both of the theatres were multi-storied. We went to the balcony of Purobi, but couldn't find a single empty seat. We came downstairs to look for seats and found only the front rows to be empty. *Panther* must be a terribly popular film, we thought. That is, however, not a testament to how good or bad the film is. We could tell from the audience reactions what the film was popular for. During the item song, especially when the heroine appeared in skimpy clothes, the whistling went on for about a whole minute. Similarly, when Jeet killed off the bad guys, the cheering elevated to a chorus roar. It didn't take a lot of analysis to know what made these audiences happy- obscenity and violence, which are worrisome things to find entertaining. On the other hand, the Shakib Khan film had only three people in the audience. The production value of film was also much less. The audience also didn't cheer to see the heroine, Bubby. We had a talk with the hall manager about why there wasn't enough people to see this film. He said, one of the reasons is that the film is old. Another reason is that Kolkata films are in fact more popular, but he couldn't bring those films to his hall because those prints are more expensive to buy. Both of the halls had hideously unhygienic conditions. The seats were dirty and ripped. One even had benches for seats and no fan, let alone air

conditioning. The projection and sound was quite good surprisingly. The audience was 100% male- no surprise there.

Are these Festivals the Solution?

The abject poverty in these localities begs the obvious question- what difference can a film festival make in the lives of people struggling with basic needs like a steady livelihood? The role of films and film festivals under these harsh realities need scrupulous examination. But based on appearances and my first-hand observation, the impact of these festivals can be far reaching.

In a culture where the dress code is so strict that any minute deviation can brand a girl adversely for life, meeting people from other cultures can be an eye opener. Some of the foreign volunteers wore short clothes to which the foreign filmmakers didn't bat an eyelash. The locals also didn't pass comments or tease them, which is unfortunately the norm in Bangladesh.

Similarly, watching foreign films exposes locals to cultures they wouldn't experience otherwise. This is not to say that we aren't already familiar with those cultures from TV and internet, but watching films together and starting a conversation is a whole different level of communication. While I cringe at the thought of what kind of conversations "Panther" would start, it is comforting to know that a film like "The Last Straw" will encourage dialogues on climate change. "Roy's Great Escape," likewise, would make people talk about how leaving your accustomed environment behind and embarking on a new journey in unfamiliar terrain can be daunting, emotional or exciting.

Ultimately, these film festivals might have a substantial impact on transforming a society that refuses to adhere to the demands of time. With more patrons, we can utilize these platforms to bring necessary social changes.

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