

Dhaka International Film Festival 2020



Dhaka is one of the busiest cities of the world with its high population, heavy traffic and all the chaos. But it is also a wonderful city that keeps its tradition of art and culture. No cultural activities are alien to this old city. It was very much evident in the 18th Dhaka International Film Festival which was held from 11th to 19th January 2020 at the various venues in the capital city of Bangladesh.

‘Better film, Better audience, Better society’ was the slogan of the festival which was fully manifested in every span of its activities. Better film attracts bigger audience and, this, in turn, leads to a better meaningful society. The organisational and the hospitality management of the festival have, no doubt, left an indelible mark in the minds of the local as well as foreign delegates. Altogether 220 films were screened in various sections such as Asian Cinema, Bangladesh Panorama, Retrospective, Women Filmmakers, Spiritual cinema, Children’s film and Short and Independent films. Each section was unique with

its fine selection and multitudinous of themes and treatments.

Competition Section

Competitions were held separately for Asian Cinema, Bangladesh Panorama, Films of Women Filmmakers, Spiritual Cinema and Short and Independent cinema. Iran had six and India had three entries respectively in the competition section. The best film award in the Asian Cinema completion also went to an Iranian film *Castle of Dreams* directed by contemporary Iranian voice Reza Mirkarimi, who also was adjudged as the Best Director of the festival. Bangladesh Panorama films were judged by the jury appointed by International Film Critics Federation (FIPRESCI). Spiritual section categorised the films with a spiritual themes that related to religious sects, compassion, hope and love that transcends beyond the boundaries. Another remarkable section was the competition for films directed by women filmmakers. Extraordinary films from women filmmakers hailing from Argentina, Austra-

lia, Bangladesh, Germany, Cyprus, Denmark, Ecuador, Finland, India, Iran, Jordan, Mexico, Norway, Palestine, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Solomon Islands, Korea, Sudan and Turkey participated in the competition. Most of the women filmmakers from these countries also attended the festival. Short and Independent film sections had an array of films from a wide range of countries which were quite encouraging for the aspiring filmmakers of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Panorama

The highlight of any international film festival is the showcasing of its native cinema. Dhaka International Film Festival had its share



of its cinema under the section 'Bangladesh Panorama'. The films in reference, no doubt, generally express the ethos and sensibilities of Bangladesh cinema in its subtle and inimitable terms, but somehow lacking originality.

Seven films were put up in the show of Bangladesh Panorama, of which at least two were related to the greatest event of the country, 'the war of liberation of 1971', which had far reaching consequences political and social psyche of the nation. The genocide, looting and the atrocities on women by the Pakistani forces and the untiring spirit of the liberation struggle had its lasting influence on Bangladesh literature, arts and crafts since 1971. And cinema, the most popular medium, always up-

held the themes of war of independence and its undying legacy of patriotism and secular nationalism.

Tunes of Nostalgia, a long documentary directed by Farid Ahmad, follows the daily routine life of a freedom fighter Rahmat Ali and his deaf and dumb son Tuhin. Rahmat Ali was injured during the war and later paralysed. Because of his son he could perform his regular chores. He used to visit the village tea shop to have chats with his fellow fighters of the past and collect the provisions of the house with the help of his son and other young fiends. But when he is in the bed, his only companion is radio which takes him back to the days of freedom struggle. The film provides an opportunity to experience the terrible trauma of the nostalgic past in the minds of freedom fighters. The filmmaker has experimented on the form of the documentary that he never uses neither commentary nor interviews, but only the dialogues of the protagonist with the people around him.

Maya, the feature length fiction film focuses on the tortured and raped women by Pakistani troops during the war of liberation, later known by the reverent name 'Birangana' (The Brave Women). Thousands of war children were born to these women who were abandoned and sometimes taken over by orphanages. Manabi Bosh was such a war child adopted by a childless couple through Mother Teresa orphanage in Kolkata. She came to know about the past history of her life from a letter left by her foster mother in her death bed. Manabi Bosh, now a grown up lady visits Bangladesh for a research on war children. She meets many Biranganas but most of them are not willing to talk about their past. However she meets a Birangana, Asiabanu by name, who tells her the harsh stories during the independence struggle. The filmmaker tries to portray the inner agony of Manabi Bosh and the untold realities of Biranganas through Asiabanu. Set in a beautiful Bangladesh village, Maya is exquisitely shot with extraordinary

frames of village life. But one should see that the film is too pretentious and lack brevity and fineness in its treatment.

Apart from the films having connection with the war of liberation other notable films were *Dare to Surf* (No Dorai), the fiction feature film and *Long Period of Persecution* (Nigrohokal), another long documentary. Set in the coastal town Cox's Bazar of Bangladesh, *Dare to Surf* directed by Taneem Rahman Angshu, portrays the life and struggles of two young surfers, Ayesha and Sohel, resulting from the social prohibitions imposed upon them by



Madhu Eravankara with Jury Members their poverty –ridden conservative families. In spite of the restrictions, Sohel manage to compete in a world surfing competition and come out with laurels. Ayesha has to succumb to the will of her parents in an unsuccessful marriage. The film is remarkable in its sincerity of approach and depiction of village life with its complexities and orthodox nature even though it is stereotype in its making. The film bagged the International Film Critic's Prize of the festival for its simple, but poignant portrayal of the shattered hopes and aspirations of the young surfers, but culminating in a brave coming back.

Long period of Persecution directed by Proshoon Rahman is a well made authentic long documentary on the most persecuted Rohingya minorities of Myanmar. The film mainly analyses the causes, course and effects of Rohingya issue in multiple levels. Interviews with national and international experts, officials, natives and the affected Rohingyans make the film authoritative. The highlight of the film is the sequences portraying the actu-

al exodus of Rohingyans to Bangladesh and their settlement in the largest refugee camp of the world at Kutupalong of Cox's Bazar. The helpless and distressed Rohingyans are appealing the mercy of the world with their disastrous past, restricted present and uncertain future.

The other films in the Bangladesh Panorama were *The Innocence* (Amra Ekta Cinema Banabo) by Md Ashraful Alam; *Mayaboti* directed by Arun Chowdhury and *Shuttle Train* by Pradip Ghosh. *The Innocence* seems to be an intellectual exercise which is elongated to a 157 minutes drama lacking coherence and clarity of thought. *Mayaboti* is a usual 'Bangla'drama with stories of love, murder, life in the brothel, the trial in the court and finally with a happy ending. Shuttle Train is again an ordinary love story in the backdrops of a campus and a shuttle train spiced with campus activism.

Bangladesh Panorama section invites only Bangladesh Premiers. So it seems that many better films of the year could not compete as they were already screened in other Bangladesh film festivals elsewhere. In spite of the perfect organisational structure of the festival this could be the reason of the poor show of vernacular films. It was desperate that one could not come across any remarkable films from this category. Most

of the films display an inclination towards the mainstream cinema in its treatment and narrative, thus blocking the innovation and artistic excellence we do expect from a native cinema that had a great tradition. However, the Bangladesh Panorama section serves the declared objectives of promoting Bangladeshi Cinema and its budding filmmakers to a great extent.

Women in Cinema

Dhaka festival's special attraction is the International Conference on 'Women in Cinema' which celebrated its 6th edition along with this festival. Glamorisation of female body is

the major trend of main stream cinema and the efforts of the independent filmmakers to portray women's potentiality as strong human beings are often pass unnoticed. The content of the films based on women requires more discussion and interaction among the film scholars, activists, film critics and also filmmakers themselves. Dhaka festival is thus committed



No Dorai

in organizing a platform for these professionals to interact among themselves on the major issue of women in cinema. As the conference envisaged, its main objective was 'to improve the standard and content of women based cinema and also to create an interaction among the women who are involved in the medium of cinema through exchanging ideas and sharing diverse experiences'. The two day International Conference was held at Samson's Lounge of the Dhaka Club in Shahbagh on 12 and 13th January, 2020. Ms. Sydney Levine, trainer, educator, writer and consultant for festival from USA was the conference director well attended by film scholars, activists, film critics and independent filmmakers from Asia and Europe specially. "Reaching out and Linking Arms around the World", "Bangladeshi Women's Contribution in the Technical Field of Cinema", " : the Binaries between Public- Private: Depiction of Refugee Women Breadwinners in Post- Partition Bengali Cinema", "Recognition of Women Professionals: on and off the Lens: Bangladesh Perspective" and "New Trends in Feminist Films from South Asia" were the main topics of deliberations. Ms Sydney Levine (USA), Ms Chaitali Sommeder (Bangladesh), Dr. Debjani Halder (India), Ms Fatima Amin (Bangladesh) and

Ms Meenakshi Shedde (India) were the main speakers of the sessions. The active participation of film scholars, film critics, programmers, Independent filmmakers and festival consultants representing women from various parts of the world made the conference a grand success.

West Meets East

"West Meets East" is another novel interactive initiative that is carried into its second edition. The one day event on the topic is to bring the film enthusiasts of Bangladesh and other south Asian countries in one platform to collaborate with western film personalities and explore the possibilities of co-production, funding and distribution. The one day programme also came out with tremendous concrete results.

Women and Iranian Cinema

The films from Iran shared a major portion of the festival. In Asian film Competition section



Mayaboti

itself out of the 19 contestants 6 were Iranian films. Independent filmmakers and film programmers and other film personalities from Iran attended the festival in large numbers. Iranian films also won all major awards of the festival. It is interesting to note that most of these films moved around the themes on women. Iranian filmmakers working under strict conditions of censorship prove again and again that they can make wonderful cinema based on the conditions of woman in the country. Films like *Hava*, , *Mariam*, *Ayesha*

by Sahraa Karimi, *The Oath* by Mohsen Tanabandeh and *Talla* by Parviz Shahbazi prove this observation. The world cinema section also had some talented cinemas from Iran like ‘*A Man without Shadow, Axing, Life Again, Mayaboti Gholamreza Takhti, Seven and a Half* and *Wedding of Zinat’s Son*.

Dhaka International Film Festival has grown into one of the matured festivals of South Asia with its diversity of approach and international participation. Since beginning, Rainbow Film Society of Dhaka has taken over the leadership of organizing the festival under the dynamic and enthusiastic Festival Director, Ahmed Muztaba Zamal. The festival is patronised by the Bangladesh Minis-

tries of Information, Finance, Home Affairs, Foreign Affairs and Cultural Affairs and institutions like Bangladesh Film Censor Board, Bangladesh National Museum, Department of Public Libraries, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka Club Limited and Alliance Francaise de Dhaka. Indian High Commission and Royal Norwegian Embassy in Bangladesh also collaborate with the festival. Dhaka film spectators need to be appreciated for their discipline in the theatres. Theatres are not overcrowded, of course, but, those who view do it seriously with a passion of cinema. This prove that definitely the festival is on the path to achieve its goal’ Better Cinema, Better Audience and Better Society’.

Dr. Madhu Eravankara is a former Secretary of FIPRESCI-India. He was a Member of FIPRESCI Jury in Dhaka International Film Festival 2020.