

The 16th DIFF: A Reportage

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It was indeed a fairly satisfying inaugural ceremony at the main auditorium of Bangladesh National Museum. The 16th edition of the Dhaka International Film Festival (DIFF) got started with the ceremonial lighting of the lamp by the Minister of Finance Abul Maal Abdul Muhit, Minister of Information Hasanul Haque Inu, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam, along with the festival founder and director Ahmed Muztaba Zamal and renowned Indian filmmaker Girish Kasaravalli who graced the festival as the chairman of the jury of the Asian competition. The welcome addresses followed, artists' performances enthralled the audiences, other routine programmes also lived up to expectations; but what entertained most and delighted the filmgoers from all over the world was a momentous decision announced by Shahriar Alam who also immensely supported the festival as its Chief Patron apart from dealing with the country's diplomatic relations. A reason to cheer about, his announcement was that a trustee board would be formed soon to ensure a smooth and trouble-free organisation of the festival in the future. Luminaries from various fields of activity, not from the film industry of the country alone, would be roped in as members of this board to felicitate running of the film festival without any financial and political obstacles.



That obviously makes sense. The Minister of Information Hasanul Haque Inu told the audience that a need for more and more such events were urgently felt in present juncture of history, in political situations like today. Such film festivals could become a part of the war against world-wide phenomena like terrorism, he said. He further explained how a meaningful film could activate the inner strength, abilities and patriotism inside a human being. When a festival showcases many such powerful films, it becomes a window to form one's own world view, to exchange ideas, even to change one's old points of view: that was what his enlightening speech made the listeners to believe and to think. With a package of 216 films from 64 countries, the 16th DIFF too had a formidable presence of very good and recent films from all nook and corners of the globe. Rainbow Film Society in the leadership of Ahmed Muztaba Zamal has been doing a fabulous job by current standards of international film festival, I would say.



As though it correlated with the spirit of the festival, the opening film was an anti-war catharsis against the backdrop of contemporary Kurdistan titled *Zer* (2017) directed by a comparatively young Turkish filmmaker Kazim Oz. The protagonist of the film, a young man who grew up in New York and was studying music, was moved by a song his ailing grandmother used to sing to him on her deathbed. It said something about a dream of a terrible massacre she had as a childhood nightmare. After her death, the young man travelled to where she was raised in the Kurdish heartland seeking the truth behind the song. In his journey, he confronted some truths, layer by layer, that revealed an unknown heritage, a hidden past to which the father of the young man fiercely objected to reconnect. That past gave hints of both love and hatred so inseparable from their existence and psyche, often

expressed in vernacular terms. The narrative was innovatively explored through use of music and juxtaposition of sound design tallied with splendid visuals. Brilliant! The film was ultimately selected for best film award in the main competition section of DIFF this year.

A film festival is not limited to screening of films or appreciation and judging of quality films alone. It is also about the sideshows, press conferences, daily bulletin, workshop and seminars as well. DIFF too had all these features that contributed to its success, glamour and attraction. It has an excellent team of volunteers who were retained after their resourceful experiences in the previous year: a reason for their services being flawless, always improvising, which I found out during my back to back sojourns to this festival. The daily bulletin of the festival proved to be a cynosure of all eyes. The Bangla language bulletin 'Utsob Protidin' carried attractive short features, reports, film reviews, film screening schedules of different festival venues, short profiles and interviews of prominent film personalities and guests alike. A few issues were collectors' delight to say the least. A filmmaking workshop from 5th to 20th January this year with participants from across the six continents was enthusiastically conducted by veteran American-English filmmaker, a diehard humanist and academician Ovidio Salazar whose in-depth studies of cinema, theatre and religion along with his globe-trotting experiences proved precious for the success of the workshop.



As usual, the festival had a two-day long conference on 'women in cinema' which may well be termed its trademark affair. This time it was the fourth international conference in a row. Organised in association with the Department of Women and Gender Studies,

University of Dhaka, and held at the Alliance Francaise de Dhaka conference hall, it has been garlanded with a clear-cut objective of improving the standard and content of women based cinema and also of creating an interaction among the women who are involved in the medium of cinema through exchanging ideas and sharing of diverse experiences. This time the conference was graced by participation of such learned speakers as celebrated film educator Sydney J. Levine, the current president of FIPRESCI (the international federation of film critics) Alin Tasciyan, Tajikistan's well-known film historian Dr. Sharofat M. Arabova, Iranian feminist writer-critic Nazanin Kaynejad, Indian media personality Aparajita Ghosh, ace academician Dr. Debjani Halder and so on.

The conference on women in cinema was inaugurated by the State Minister of Information Tarana Halim. She unequivocally praised the concerted effort to discuss the roles played by women in various walks of life and nation building including that of cinema. In almost every sphere in Bangladesh women had proved their mettle, but participation in the world of cinema was yet to be expanded, she opined.



While acknowledging the truth she spoke from the perspective of her country, it would also be imperative to realise that women in film industry had been fighting for equality ever since the invention of cinema – a factual truth which exactly marked the beginning of the keynote address by Alin Tasciyan. With some bitter truth from recent history of how women filmmakers and artists were rather made to suffer, Alin dealt the subject heavily: “Women are systematically objectified in front of the camera, female body and beauty are used and abused. Women are systematically prevented from working behind the camera, their projects are despised and ambitious projects are trusted to male filmmakers. Film historians systematically ignore women’s contribution to cinema, their articles and books rarely focus on female filmmakers and seldom mention them.” She went on to draw last year’s sensational

revelation famously known as #MeToo movement by which millions of women globally shared their stories of sexual harassment and abuse using the hashtag #metoo; and by which, from the aspect of the film industry, people came to know how the predators terrorize and despise their employees, especially women, with examples drawn from Hollywood's celebrities like that of Salma Hayek's stature.

An honest admission by Sydney Levine, famed for her path-breaking movie database created in 1988, kept participants in the conference amused and satisfied. Being a liberally educated woman, she considered herself nurturing a 'westernized' view, which she admitted as 'prejudiced'. Her keynote paper focused on the perception of South Asian women by western women through cinema and she was prompt to tell that since her "eyes are westernized" she saw a Third World women "through an American prism in spite of my pretence of worldly sophistication". But she immediately tended to discover that she had certain instant reactions while looking through that 'prism', only to question those reactions and hold them in check at the same time. Sydney's paper oscillated from one end assessing harsh realities of South Asian societies where women were subjected to all kinds of atrocity and discrimination to the other end taking into account of depiction of women on films. Her paper was both persuasive and perceptive and hence interesting. She concluded by passing an important suggestion that – as the paucity of South Asian female role models limit the distribution of the films from this region, and so – "if a country looked at the export role film could serve in the economy, it might further the place of women in society at the same time by opening the films up to more fully developed women's stories". No doubt, this proposition ought to open up further discussion on a prospect and the component rationale behind her far-sighted suggestion.

It would be unfair if I do not mention the topics of other keynote papers of different sessions of the conference. Each of the speakers, being women in their best of social critique, dwelt women issues at length through cinema in regional perspective. Sharofat M. Arabova threw lights on the pioneering women filmmakers in early Central Asian cinema. Aparajita Ghosh made an impressive point by noting that Bengal could show the way to lessen gender imbalance in Indian film industry. Debjani Halder's engrossing paper was on how to deconstruct motherhood in Indian cinema that formed a part of critical feminist discourse. Nazanin Kaynejad's emphasized on women in avant-garde where she discussed a Chantal Akerman film and a Judith Mayne book in an engaging detail. However what caught my attention outside the conference was a marginal but meaningful piece of write-up published in the festival bulletin 'Utsob Protidin'. It was a review of the conference by a very young journalist-filmmaker based in Dhaka, Tania Noor by name. Her review showed her grasp and understanding of the issues involving women in cinema, both in front of the camera and behind the camera. May her dearest wish: a wish of every sensitive human being indeed, irrespective of gender identity – of women filmmakers becoming an integral part of film art as a whole, of financial investment in the woman's filmmaking ability becoming an automatically natural phenomenon, when the tag of 'woman' from a filmmaker's individuality becomes obsolete – turn to reality in very near future!

The festival has had another distinction which is rare in film festival circuits. For the first time, an exclusive film critics' assembly was hosted by DIFF at the conference hall of the Hotel La Vinci, Dhaka on 15th January 2018. It was a seven-hour long 1st Asian Film Critics Assembly (AFCA) organised jointly by FIPRESCI and International Film Critics Association of Bangladesh (IFCAB). The event was of utmost importance as it was held in the backdrop of a fast-changing time, a time when even FIPRESCI had to assess the current situation and the future of film criticism. A sociological survey was undertaken by the organisation last year where approximately one thousand film critics took part. The results of the survey which objectively looked at problems being faced by film critics in different countries, whether these problems represent a global tendency etc., are yet to see the light of the day. The general realisation is that the situation of journalists working in cultural sections, among them film critics, is getting worse every year. Last year Australia saw many people consisting writers and film critics joining a chorus protesting against cuts to arts coverage at various newspapers and abolishing of dedicated arts, film and books writers and senior staffs specialising in arts criticism. Yet the unfortunate development has taken place for all to see, although it is generally agreed that a good literate coverage of visual arts, music and film is crucial for any newspaper that considers itself a part of the national conversation.



So, explicably enough, the deliberations at the Asian Film Critics Assembly are of immense value. Alin Tasciyan, the President of FIPRESCI, presided over the assembly while Rabiul Hussain, the President of IFCAB, was also in the presidium. The critics who took part in the assembly were Artur Vardikyan (Armenia), Ershad Kamol (Bangladesh), Liuying Cao (China), Premendra Mazumder (India), Khoshrow Dengan (Iran), Atsuko Saito (Japan), Gulbara Tolomushova (Kyrgyzstan), Seok Yong Chang (South Korea), Ashley M. Ratnavibhushana (Sri Lanka), Sharofat M. Arabova (Tajikistan) and Necla Algan (Turkey).

Only one invited critic, Fred Wong (Hong Kong) could not come in person, but he had sent a written report. Most of the participants in the assembly submitted written report reflecting on the status of film criticism in their respective countries and a very cordial discussion followed their submissions. Though being an absentee, I also kept record of the assembly with keen interests, because it had been really a matter of concern that since 1990, when the world ceased to be a bipolar political entity, film criticism had been going through a critical phase. In an age of liberalisation and free market economy, the space for meaningful film criticism in the print media had shrunk like never before and replaced by cheap and superficial film reviews, as lamented by no less than an eminent critic like Derek Malcolm, the president of the International Film Critics' Circle (IFCC). The tyranny of entertainment continued unabated and the emergence of the Internet and online participation of the often biased or opinionated, sometimes hired voices made a genuine critic's position vulnerable and exposed to regular abuses. Critics like A. O. Scott, the chief film critic of 'The New York Times' had to face all the derogatory slurs on the social media just for pointing out certain flaws of a blockbuster Hollywood movie. Indian film scholar and critic M. K. Raghavendra had to face unprecedentedly violent abuse for his criticism of the recent big-budgeted box-office hit *Baahubali 2: The Conclusion*. Examples are aplenty where the verbal assaults marked a general decline in the cultural dialogue which might be essential for a healthy arts ecosystem and social and intellectual uplift.



All this is happening at a time when it is revealed again and again that creative and cultural activity's contribution to GDP has been growing significantly. More and more people started to believe that the arts including 'the most important of the arts' cinema make for a

richer and more meaningful life. The situation is undoubtedly serious, though all are not lost, and the overall atmosphere is still open to changes and improvement. Premendra Mazumder revealed that being the largest film producing country in the world, film criticism in India enjoyed a significant status in the media. The film critics assembly observed that there was a potential scope to improve the status of film criticism in other countries as well.



On the next day, all the film critics had an interactive session with the promising filmmakers of Dhaka at the behest of the International Emerging Talent Films Association (IETFAs) based in the city. The venue of this exciting session of exchanging facts and ideas was a refurbished Liberation War Museum that was rebuilt of late with unforgettable, historic and valuable memories from the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. Participants in this lively interaction noted with satisfaction that Bangladesh was coming up as a very important country in the scenario of Asian Cinema. If it happens, then it would be better for not only the film industry and for the appreciation of the creative arts, but for the society as a whole too.

The list of awards given away at the 16th DIFF is as follows:

Asian Films Competition Section –

Best Film: **Zer** (Turkey) directed by Kazim Oz

Best Director: **Onur Saylak** for **Daha** (Turkey)

Best Cinematography: **Masoud Salami** for **Asphyxia** (Iran) directed by Fereydoun Jeyrani

Best Script: **Onur Saylak, Dogu Yasar Akal and Hakan Gunday** for **Daha** (Turkey) directed by Onur Saylak

Best Actor: **Allen Dizon** for *Bomba* (Philippines) directed by Ralston Gonzales Jover
Best Actress: **Parinaz Izadyar** and **Mina Sadati** for *Tabestan-e Dagh* (Iran) directed by Ebrahim Irajzad

Women Filmmakers Section –

Best Feature: *Sofichka* (Russia) directed by Kira Kovalenko
Best Documentary: *Parlika* (Afghanistan) directed by Dr. Sahraa Karimi
Special Mention (Documentary): *Thank you for the Rain* (Norway, UK) directed by Julia Dahr
Best Short fiction: *Anna* (Czech Republic, USA) directed by Petra Priborska
Special Mention (Short Fiction): *Les Bigorneaux* (France) directed by Alice Vial

Short and Independent Films –

Best Short fiction: *The Violet* (Iraq) directed by Baqer Al Rubaie
Special Mention (Short Fiction): *Pounopunik* (Bangladesh) directed by Khandaker Sumon
Best Documentary: *Continental Drift* (UK) directed by Pietro Novello
Special Mention (Documentary): *A Song for Barpak* (Nepal) directed by Pradip Pokhrel

Spiritual (Interfaith) Films –

Best Feature: *Amun* (Russia) directed by Anar Abbasov
Special Mention (Feature): *Breakthrough* (Tajikistan) directed by Umedsho Mirzoshirinov
Best Documentary: *Aceh: Beyond The Tsunami* (Australia, Indonesia) directed by Tim Barretto
Best Short fiction: *Still Yet* (Iran) directed by Arash Yazdani

FIPRESCI Award (Bangladesh Panorama) –

Best Director: **Tauquir Ahmed** for *Halda* (Bangladesh)
Best Film: *Shohagir Goyna* (Bangladesh) directed by Lata Ahmed

Best Children Film Badal Rahman Award –

White Bridge (Iran) directed by Ali Ghavitan

Best Audience Award –

Tope (India) directed by Buddhadeb Dasgupta

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