

Rising stature of a film festival

An overview of the 17th Dhaka International Film Festival

By Manoj Barpujari

A milestone: It was a pleasant surprise, associated with a bold documentary that addressed the ordeals and memories of the most marginalized section of the society when it came to recognizing the sacrifices made by people during a war. An award acceptance speech was followed by a standing ovation to wartime rape-survivors. Serendipity! For, so many years they remained unsung, until a native of Bangladesh made the film. The time of making this film coincided with the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina taking a decision to call them “Birangona” (Brave Woman) and accolade them with honours as heroines of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. As hundreds of thousands of girls and women were tortured and raped by themilitary and their collaborators during the East Pakistan Genocide, the living ones carry the ravages of the bitter experiences. Now their stories are retold by decently edited interviews in this film.

Titled Rising Silence (2018), an almost feature-length documentary, itis conceived and directed by a British-Bangladeshi playwright Leesa Gazi. With a rewarding



experience of researching and telling the stories of the socially ostracized women through theatre a few years back and after an extensive tour undertaken by the production, she filmed it. The director herself is seen cajoling, cheering the war-time rape-survivors as a soulful interviewer that makes the film a relationship story of different generations. Largely ignored in the national narrative till the other day, many an individual story were inter-woven into the film. It was heart-drenching to realize how the victims, and their children and grandchildren too, had been discriminated by their own people owing to the prejudice associated with raped women. Undoubtedly, it stands out as a milestone in South Asian history of ethical and socially committed films. Thanks to the filmmaker and the London-based theatre and art group Komola Collective for taking the initiative, the 17th edition of DIFF accorded a standing ovation to not only the director – for winning the best documentary film award in women filmmakers section – but also for two aged Birangonas called on to the stage at the closing ceremony of the festival at the Bangladesh National Museum’s “Mul Milanayatan” (main auditorium) on 18th January, 2019.

The exuberance: There was great excitement and enthusiasm among the organizers as well as the spectators as evident from the very outset when the festival was





opened amid fanfare, song and dance treats by local artists on 10th January. The nation’s former Finance Minister Abul Maal Abdul Muhith inaugurated it, while the festival director Ahmed Muztaba Zamal addressed a jam-packed main auditorium of the National Museum in his welcome speech.

State minister for foreign affairs Shahriar Alam, who also happened to be the chief patron of the festival, presided over the inaugural ceremony. Mr. Muhith specifically said about promotion of good local films and cultural understanding through films in the festival. It had been successfully providing a platform for young and promising filmmakers to connect to the trends of world cinema according to Mr. Zamal. The films showcased in DIFF with its constant theme being “better film, better

audience, better society”, could broaden the general outlook of all people, as said by Mr. M. Hamid, one of the key persons of the festival’s organizing committee.

With a total of 218 films from 72 countries spread out in eight sections, the festival got a flying start with screening of Turkish director Andac Haznedaroglu’s refugee drama *The Guest*(2017) as the inaugural film. One of the strong contenders among the selected 22 films in the Asian competition section, the Turkish-Jordanian co-production takes off from an exodus of people trying to escape the war in Syria. A 10-year old girl Lena with her little baby sister, apparently separated from their family members due to loss of lives, wends her way to neighbouring Turkey with others. A solitary young lady Meryem is in touch with the little girls’ relative in Germany by a mobile phone and with great risk she takes care of the tiny tots till they get accompaniment to the other shore of Europe by the sea. The film reveals the layers of human bondage, desire for greener pastures of life in a minimalist way, though the underlying socio-economic realities, unending challenges and hostility didn’t lose any grip on the narrative. It is a horrid tale of most contemporary cruelty not bounded by geo-political borders. That an event opens eyes to these realities is one laudable aspect of an international film festival which goes without saying. The shout-out from Dhaka was clear: humanity should address the most pressing problems and inhuman conditions on earth seriously.

Ethnic mores: The best film award winner in the main competition section of Asian films in the 17th DIFF was *Darakyry* (*The Song of the Tree*, 2018) from Kyrgyzstan.



Directed by Aibek Daiyrbekov, it is a love story based on slices of Turkic life and the value system from the eighteenth century but presented as a musical social drama. Composed with breathtaking visuals against an unforgettable tapestry of the Tian Shan mountain range, and enduring musical numbers with the use of ethnic instruments that bear resemblance of ballads, the film celebrates cinematic vocabularies while retelling Kyrgyz folklore. A solitary tree in a plateau village inhabited by a wandering tribe is the centre of the premise and it is considered sacred. But when young Esen steals cooked horse-meat prepared for a wedding feast, the local lord Bazarbai not only ordered Esen to leave the village but also ordered for felling of the tree to make for firewood. Soon afterward, the village fills with strife and death. Following other demoralizing incidents Bazarbai's family also moves out and settles down in a distant village. Ultimately the plot gives way for a happy ending for Esen and his love, Bazarbai's younger daughter, but not without Bazarbai making self-sacrifice for the honour and morale of his family. The cinematic exploits in Darakyry are usually over-emphasized in cinemas of Central Asian regions, but for the very reason that they are handled with ease they appear as genuine tropes.

On the other hand, DIFF's coveted award for the best film in Bangladesh Panorama section given by the FIPRESCI (International Federation of Film Critics) jury was won by Sonatan Golpo (Ancient Trap, 2018). This section screened ten recently made local films among which the Masum Aziz directed film had the last laugh. Coming out as a debut feature from an experienced theatre activist of Bangladesh, the film gives a story of poverty, squalor and exploitation of distressed people told with deep empathy. Set in a village of fishermen community, the film shows a money lender who takes advantage of helplessness of the illiterate people and traps them for life. Every year he takes young men for his newly made fishing boat. The protagonist in the film Sadhu ultimately surrenders to the moneylender's shrewd tricks leaving his sweetheart Lakshmi in utter despair as all fishermen including Sadhu prepares to go to the sea for four to five months. She knows that the yearly contract meant for every fisherman is actually a life contract, shattering her dream of leaving the village for a better life elsewhere. The film is a strong testimony of what a section of working people are made to suffer in rural Bangladesh without any alternative in sight, in a narrative replete with details of local ambience.

Great master: The Retrospective section featured seven films by the prominent Serbian director Goran Paskaljevic, who is hailed as one of Europe's most respected independent filmmakers. One who has been highlighting issues of nationalism and freedom, often focusing on how hatred and violence continue to siege spaces in the modern age, Paskaljevic was marked as one of the world's top five directors of the

year 2001 by Variety International Film Guide. By choosing his films, DIFF had actually celebrated an opportunity to get introduced to a great filmmaker whose striking style is mostly driven by condensed narrative. His works revolve around conflicting idiosyncratic and humane characters in urban set-up. There could be everyday reality lurking behind his tales, but what sets them apart from other contemporary filmmakers is the stark reality of the extraordinary – in other words he always tries to interpret life under threat, particularly lives of the disadvantaged and the helpless. Critics and academics would like to say that here is a filmmaker who becomes a voice of the voiceless, who champions the causes of the gypsies, the immigrants, the disabled, the elderly, and so on. His 1998 film Powder Keg (Cabaret Balkan) that won FIPRESCI award at the highly prestigious Venice Film Festival is a perfect example of his style of work.



The film is set on a harsh winter night in Belgrade where different characters are caught in a chain of violent incidents and aggressive behaviours from strangers. Those who are at the receiving end are generally weaker people like aged citizen, women and unarmed youths. Patchworks of one story spontaneously lead to another one exposing cruelty and fatality. The film starts with a taxi driver encountering passengers each of whom having different problems. Elsewhere a crazy young man hijacks a bus and abuses women and aged persons in the bus. As small events turn to gruesome terror, a young lady flees from the bus, only to find herself caught between her misbehaving boyfriend and an unsparing drug lord. Meanwhile the



masochistic drug lord's young assistant somehow saves himself from mob lynching for a completely wrong reason. On the other side of the town, different episodes of lewd activities are evolving in front of awestruck spectators. Some people seem to behave in most unexpected, sadistic ways – leaving the lesser mortals with only one option to choose between a greater and a lesser evil. Some characters turn up in another situation or another place, thus acting like a haunting reminder of bizarre happenings. There is a great deal of ugliness of humans turning up as inhuman beings, even suggesting physical caricature of infamous statesman like Slobodan Milosevic – by which the director suggests that disdain for fellow citizens is so ingrained in a sick culture that ethnic cleansing could easily become an organized form of outrage. A modern allegory of violence thus unfolds in the film which always merits discussion and will continue to do so.

Women in cinema: A regular feature of the festival, for the fifth time in a row, has been a two-day conference on women in cinema. It was organized by the festival's founding organizer Rainbow Film Society jointly with the department of women and gender studies of Dhaka University. Every year this conference is used to have thought-provoking sessions of research papers read out by film personalities, writers, academics and activists, and this year too it was no exception. Noted US film festival consultant and journalist Sydney Levine drew attention to the glaring fact

that while in the past two decades the US had sunk from 52nd in the world for women's political representation to 104th today, in Hollywood too even more dismal numbers of women were in the closed circles of studio owners, their friends, family and filmmakers. "At a time when women make up 50.8% of the US population and 50% of the ticket buyers to movies in theatres, just 4.2% of the 100 top-grossing American films are made by female directors", Levine further elaborated. But on the



positive side, virtually every major network and studio of late had established some form of talent-development program designed to open doors behind the camera for women. What had been causing change in Hollywood were the #Me Too Movement, as sexual harassers were publicly shown the door and the pay gap was swiftly addressed, she opined as such.

What is the place occupied by the new generation of women directors in the world cinema in the age of intensified manifestation for gender equality and protests against structural male violence? This question was dealt with aplomb by renowned Turkish film critic and historian Alin Tasciyan, presently the Deputy General Secretary of FIPRESCI. Her paper was read out as she could not come to Dhaka. Young Indian actress and director Aparajita Ghosh spoke about emergence of women filmmakers and the role of film institutions in the changing scenario. Factually speaking she said that presence of behind-the-camera women in film industry could be calcu-

lated as only 19% in India even today. Taking part in the discussion, veteran Indian actress and film director Bijaya Jena said that under present-day digitalization of



film equipments, increasing number of women were seen joining film schools now as cinema, television and multi-media had increasingly become safe for women as a fall-out of #MeToo with strict anti-harassment cells established by the schools and the government. Interesting points were raised by noted California based Professor of cinema and television arts Alexis Krasilovsky, Kolkata based filmmaker Dr. Debjani Halder, media personality from Bangladesh Samia Zaman and Montenegrin critic-journalist Maja Bogojevic, among others.

Fruitful meets: For only the second time, the Dhaka festival successfully hosted the Asian Film Critics Assembly where critics of the region analyzed the current trends of film criticism in their respective countries. The International Film Critics Association of Bangladesh (IFCAB) was the main organizer of the assembly with a clear indication of bringing together Asian film critics in order to communicate, share professional experiences and opinions on the general state of film criticism in Asia. The participants were Artur Vardikyan from Armenia, Ershad Kamol from Bangladesh, Liuying Cao from China, Premendra Mazumder from India, Atsuko Saito from Japan, Seok Yong Chang from South Korea, Sharofat M Arabova from Tajikistan, Necla Algan from Turkey and Gulbara Tolomushova from Kyrgyzstan. Several issues concerning film criticism came up in their discussions – like available training and other facilities and impacts of film criticism in the film market on one hand, and the influence of Europe in writing film criticism on the other hand. The assembly also declared its intent of holding such events regularly, ensuring participation of critics from other countries of Asia and facilitating collaborative efforts for



promotion of film critics in the region.

In another day-long event, a first in the history of the festival, an interactive session of Bangladeshi filmmakers with foreign guests was held at the Dhaka Club premise. The prime motivation behind this programme named as “West Meets East” was to explore the possibilities of the international demand and market for quality films. While film expert Sydney Levine stressed on the significance of understanding the medium adequately, a seasoned Bangladeshi film director Tauquir Ahmed threw lights on myriad of challenges and hurdles facing the filmmakers of the sub-continent. According to Mr. Ahmed who had couple of well-accepted films to his credit, including Haldaa (2017), one of the prime factors that imposed restriction on the quality of local films was the budget, whereas the Western films appealed more due to the hefty budget allocated for the making, though, he made it clear, big budget sans technical inaptness couldn’t assure quality production. Another local film director Abu Shahed Emon, of Jalal’s Story(2014) fame, lamented that yearly income of Netflix from Bangladeshi subscribers stood around 120 Crores Taka and yet it refrained from investing in the film industry of the country; he hoped that the company would soon invest and assist the local film community to flourish. There were many other speakers ranging from producers, distributors, festival organizers, journalists, both young and old, with bags full of content and expressions from different regions around the globe shedding lights on important issues.

Growing stature:The last edition of DIFF really exhibits the coming-of-age film festival in its own right. Being a witness since 2010, I can say how it inspires young filmmakers from all continents. Earlier it was meant to be an Australasian film festival, but nowadays films from all around the globe are showcased, as entries in various sections this year and the results in different competition sections display. An

erstwhile biennial event now run on annual basis, this festival is really grown in stature. From three venues to six screens at present, it is thriving with vibrant ingredients.

Competition results of the 17th DIFF:

(1) Best Children Film Badal Rahman Award:

Little Prince of our City, Directed by Talgat Temenov (Kazakhstan)

(2) Best Audience Award:

EK Je Chilo Raja, Directed by Srijit Mukherji (India)

(3) FIPRESCI Award (Bangladesh Panorama Section):

Sonatan Golpo, Directed by Masum Aziz (Bangladesh)

(4) Best Short Fiction in Women Filmmakers Section:

Bitter Sea, Directed by Fateme Ahmadi (UK)

(5) Special Mention (Documentary)in Women Filmmakers Section:

Burkinabe Bounty, Directed by Iara Lee (Burkina Faso, USA, Bulgaria, Italy)

(6) Best Documentary in Women Filmmakers Section:

Rising Silence, Directed by Leesa Gazi (Bangladesh, India, UK)

(7) Best Feature Film in Women Filmmakers Section:

Mamang, Directed by Denise O'hara (Philippines)

(8) Best Short Fiction in Spiritual Film Section:

Return, Directed by Shahriar Pourseyedian (Iran)

(9) Best Documentary in Spiritual Film Section:

Walking for Genna, Directed by Frederic Furnelle and Oliver Bourget (Belgium, Ethiopia)

(10) Best Feature in Spiritual Film Section:

Namdev Bhau, Directed by Dar Gai (India, Ukraine)

(11) Best Script in Asian Competition Section:

Signal Rock (for Rody Vera), Directed by Chito Rono (Philippines)

(12) Best Cinematography in Asian Competition Section:

Shynyrau (for Rifkat Ibragimov), Directed by Zhanabek Zhetiruov (Kazakhstan)

(13) Best Actress in Asian Competition Section:

Sofra Sirlari (for Demet Evgar), Directed by Umit Unal (Turkey)

(14) Best Actor in Asian Competition Section:

Kardeşler (for Yigit Ege Yazar), Directed by Ömür Atayn (Turkey)

(15) Best Director in Asian Competition Section:

Pooya Badkoobeh for the film Dressage (Iran)

(16) Best Film in Asian Competition Section:

Darakry (The Song of the Tree), Directed by Aibek Daiyrbekov (Kyrgyzstan)

About the author

Manoj Barpujari is a writer-journalist and member of FIPRESCI and Film Critics Circle of India, received the national award for the best film critic of India in 2012. He has published 13 books including three volumes on cinema, and edits a quarterly film journal. He also serves as a governing body member of Jyoti Chitraban (Film Studio) in Assam, India, and earlier served as juror in international film festivals of Busan, Port of Spain, Almaty, Dhaka, Bengaluru, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Thiruvananthapuram, Siliguri, among others.