

Jury Report
Siraj Syed

20th Dhaka International Film Festival 2022



Despite the prevalent Covid situation, Rainbow Film Society held its 20th Dhaka International Film Festival (DIFF) in the capital city of Bangladesh during January 15-23. A three-member FIPRESCI Jury was appointed to select the Best Film from the Bangladesh Panorama. Consisted of Mohamed Sayed Abdelrehim from Egypt, Bidhan Ribeiro from Bangladesh, and this writer. Mohamed works for the Middle East News Agency and is also a translator. Bidhan is a Bengali author of several books and works for a Bengali/English news portal Songbad Prokash. A person of Portuguese descent, like Bidhan, must be a rarity in that country. I am a lecturer in media and an actor. All three of us, of course, by definition, are film critics and members of FIPRESCI. Egypt has about 60 members, Bangladesh has 7, while India has 36.

Debanik Kundu was our co-ordinator in India, taking care of tickets and Visas. I had received a letter

from the Bangladesh Ministry of Home Affairs, dated 18 December 2021, approving Visa on Arrival to around 90 people, with their names via email, with my name at No. 46. This meant that I did not need a Visa stamped on my passport in Mumbai. But Mr. Kundu insisted that the Visa on Arrival may not be sufficient and that I must get a stamped Visa from the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission (BDHC). I visited the BDHC twice and tried hard to get a Visa stamped but was told that since a Visa on Arrival has been issued, it would be highly inappropriate of the BDHC to issue another Visa. I was requested to co-ordinate with three other people – Rajni Basumatary, a filmmaker, and Juror in the Spiritual films section, Gaurav Madan, a filmmaker whose feature film Barah by Barah was being screened at DIFF and who was participating in the screenplay and pitching Lab and Rohit Khaitan, a director, who had the short film Dar-Ba-Dar being screened at DIFF. In the end, Rohit

pulled out, and the other two told me that they would manage on their own.

Starting from Mumbai on the night of 14th January, we arrived in Dhaka at about 9 am on the 15th. At Dhaka, we were greeted by huge crowds at the airport and shuttled from one serpentine queue to the other. I had a double dose vaccine certificate and a Covid Test Negative Report, done less than 24 hours before departure from Mumbai, which met their mandatory requirements. After several points of checking, when my turn came to get my passport checked, the man at the immigration counter flipped through the pages, searching for the Visa and asked me to show it to him. I told him that a Visa on Arrival had been approved and showed him the letter. He then asked me to go to the Police Counter, along with Gaurav, who had the same issue. When our turn came at the Visa on Arrival counter, manned by the police, we were told to pay for it at the bank counter, which was adjacent. The payment was mandatory, he insisted. Right in front of our eyes, some of the other delegates got Visas at other counters without paying. Still, we were told that the only way a Visa would be granted to us would be by paying USD 51.33 (approximately Rs. 3,900), or its equivalent in Bangladesh Takas, at the bank. Since there was nobody present from DIFF, we called Debanik, and he said he would try to see what he could do but nothing was done. He then said that he would try and get a reimbursement. Since we did not have any Takas, we paid by credit cards. After three hours inside immigration, we searched for our luggage, which was found after some searching, since the flight had landed hours ago. We finally came out of the airport at noon.

A couple of volunteers were waiting outside, waving DIFF placards, and took care of our luggage, leading us to our pick-up cars. I was worried about the scheduling because our Jury was supposed to view the first film at 10.30 am that day, and it was already 12. The volunteers told us that Jury screenings had been cancelled for the day and would begin the next day. I breathed a sigh of relief. Having spent 8 hours in a layover at Delhi airport, the flying time, plus another three hours at the airport, I wasn't shape to start Jury duty immediately. I was taken to Hotel La Vinci (not Da, but La), in Kawran Bazar, in the Dhaan Mondhi area. I was given a room on the 12th floor; the top floor and Gaurav was booked at another

hotel. La Vinci was housed only from the 6th to the 12th floors. After a bit of unpacking and a quick shower, I had lunch in the restaurant on the 12th floor, along with other delegates. Incidentally, the 13th floor of La Vinci had a club/disco, where both orchestras and karaoke singers perform every night to loud music, and guests have their drinks and dancing sessions, which made it difficult for guests on the 12th floor to sleep.

Though I had seen some of the delegates at the restaurant, we got to know each other as we met at the Dhaka (Tennis) Club, which was our regular lunch and dinner venue, and at the screening venues, viz. the single auditorium holding Public Library (where the festival office and other stalls were located), the National Museum, where there are two theatres, the Shilpakala Academy, which had another two, and the Alliance Française, a single screen venue. The inaugural ceremony was held at the National Museum. Our Jury screenings were held at the Sufia Kamal Auditorium, the smaller theatre at the National Museum, called JaadooGhor by the locals. There were only nine films listed, which would not take more than two days to view, thus leaving us free to see other movies or explore the country. As it transpired, one film was not shown for reasons best known to the authorities, while another got the Censor Board's No Objection Certificate only on the second day of screening. With only eight films in hand, we finished Jury duty in two days. Regular screenings at all the auditoria began on the 16th of January.



Author with jury colleagues in Dhaka Festival

Both Mohamed and Bidhan were extremely cordial and friendly people. Bidhan insisted on treating us to beverages, and even a sumptuous lunch,

at a restaurant located in a mall. Three days before the festival's conclusion, we were to undergo a Covid Test because we were invited to a Minister's residence for dinner the next night. Rather, unfortunately, 10-11 delegates/Jury members tested positive and were quarantined. Naturally, they were not invited to the dinner. Some of them tested negative in a subsequent test three days later, while others continued to test positive. It must be appreciated that the Rainbow Film Society and its supporters, led by Festival Director Ahmed Muftaba Zamal and his team, bore all the expenses for their extended stay. Fellow Juror Mohamed had tested positive and had to stay back for a few days after the festival, missing out on the closing ceremony.

The day before the closing ceremony, the day after the dinner, was a quarantine day, as was the day of the closing ceremony. After the 10+ positive scare, they were taking no chances. Attendance at the closing ceremony was optional, as we were advised to stay inside the hotel. But with Mohamed under quarantine, I felt it my duty to join Bidhan at the ceremony. We were called on the stage and told to speak, me first, without any notice. I began in my rudimentary Bengali and was greeted with applause, after which I switched to English. I then passed my microphone to Bidhan, who, in the meanwhile, had been passed an envelope containing the slip on which the name of the winning film was written. Of course, we both knew the name, but the formality was fulfilled. *Ajob Karkhana*, produced by Samia Zaman and directed by Mirza Shabnam Ferdousi, won the FIPRESCI Prize for Best Film in the Bangladesh Panorama section. All other prizes in the other sections, namely Asian Films Competition, Interfaith Spiritual Films, Women Filmmakers, West Meets East, Screenplay Lab, were also announced.

Showing due diligence, I got a total of five tests in two weeks and all due care had to be taken as DIFF was organized against all odds. Out of 90+ international delegates expected, only half of them turned up. And, of them, more than ten tested

positive. Mr. Zamal announced that the festival was being held despite a substantial loss for the second year in succession. I must congratulate the entire team, including Baisakhi Samaddar 'Bani,' Secretary-General of Rainbow Film Society, and the two volunteers who looked after us, Isham Rahman and Samiat Sourav, who arranged all our transport.



Apart from Jury duty, I took the opportunity to go to Comilla in Bangladesh (now renamed Comilla) with my host and benefactor, Humayun Qader Chowdhury, better known as H.Q. Comilla is the origin city of the great Indian film composer of Hindi, and Bengali language Sachin Dev Burman (SDB). He was born in the early 20th century and educated here as well. We sat at the side of the pond, where the royal son of the Tripura Kingdom, of which Comilla was a part, used to play the flute, while his pal Kazi Nazrul Islam wrote lyrics and composed the tunes for years. Comilla is a 2-2 ½ hour drive from Dhaka. Humayun Qader has written SDB's biography, *Incomparable Sachin Dev Burman*, and has been trying hard to get the narrow road adjacent to the pond named after him. The book is available on Amazon and a must-read for all fans of Sachinda. The building where he lived remains partly restored, and a cultural program is held there every year, on SDB's birthday. For the rest of the year, it remains barren.

Mr. Siraj Syed is a Member of FIPRESCI-India based in Mumbai.