

Article

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Cinema in Bangladesh



Mukh O Mukhosh (1956)

The Origin

Bangladesh was born as a sovereign and independent nation on 16 December 1971. Before that, since 14 August 1947 this particular territory was known as East Pakistan. And before 1947, it was a part of the undivided India. History of cinema was originated in this geo-region since very beginning. Soon after the Lumière Brothers first presented the marvel of moving images to the public at Salon Indien du Grand Café in Paris on 28 December 1895, it appeared in Dhaka (capital city of Bangladesh). A news published on 24 April 1898 in the weekly 'Dhaka Prakash' confirmed that the 'Bradford Bioscope Company' of Calcutta (Kolkata) had shown their 'bioscope' at the 'Crown Theater' in Patuatuli near Sadarghat in Dhaka on 17 April (1898). Price of the ticket was between eight Anaa and three Rupees, which was too high on that time. Regular screening started in the first permanent cinema hall 'Picture House' in Dhaka in

1913. Later the theater was renamed first as 'New Picture House' and then as 'Shabistan' after renovation in the late fifties of the last century.

Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* premiered at the 'Olympia Theatre', Bombay (Mumbai) on 21 April 1913, and released for public at the 'Coronation Cinematograph and Variety Hall' in Bombay on 3 May 1913. As the producer, director, and all cast and crew members were Indian, this 40 minute long silent feature was accepted as the first Indian film in the history of cinema. But to reach here, the history of Indian cinema had to pass through a long journey since the arrival of cinema in India on 7 July 1896, just after six months of the Lumières' first public show in Paris, when an advertisement in the 'Times of India' invited the Bombay residents to witness "the marvel of the century, the wonder of the world" at 'Watson's Hotel' on the same evening. And this period between 1896 and 1913 was the germinating time of the seed of Indian film industry

which would come out as the largest of the world in future. The person who took initiative to nurture this seed with his passion and skill, perseverance and care, love and emotion, was Hiralal Sen, a Bengali photographer and entrepreneur, born on 2 August 1868 at the Bogjuri village in Manikganj near Dhaka. In truest sense of the term, Hiralal Sen was the ‘Adi-Purush’ of Indian Cinema.



Hiralal Sen

Being a son of a famous zamindar family, Hiralal Sen had the opportunity to pursue his interest in photography since when he was studying in a college in Calcutta after passing out from the school in Manikganj in 1879. Hiralal established a photographic studio named ‘H.L. Sen and Brothers: Amarabati Fine Arts Association’ in 1890 at their ancestral palace in Bogjuri village taking his two brothers Motilal and Devilal as his partners. In that period, it was quite a revolutionary project in such a remote village in undivided Bengal. Famous writer, educationist and historian Dr. Dinesh Chandra Sen was Hiralal’s cousin brother. They were childhood friends and were studying together while in school. Young Dinesh Chandra was an expert in origami and shadow play which motivated Hiralal into the photography. Between 1887 and 1898, Hiralal won

golden medals for seven times for his excellence in photography. This was the period when Bioscope came to Calcutta. Thomas Hudson’s ‘Hudson Surprise Party’ first launched the public screenings of bioscope on 18 January 1897 showing eight small pieces of silent moving images which attracted the magician of photography Hiralal Sen towards this new form of art. In 1898, a short film was screened by one Professor Stevenson at the ‘Star Theater’ in Calcutta along with the stage show *The Flower of Persia*. Hiralal made his first film *A Dancing Scene from The Flower of Persia* borrowing the camera from Stevenson. Same year he bought a projector machine named ‘Urban Bioscope’ from Charles Urban’s ‘Warwick Trading Company’ in London. On 4 February 1898 Hiralal Sen, along with his younger brother Motilal Sen, established the ‘Royal Bioscope Company’.

Amarendranath Dutt’s ‘Classic Theater’ was enormously popular at that period in Calcutta. Hiralal and Amarendranath were good friends. Hiralal’s ‘Royal Bioscope Company’ presented their first public show at Amarendranath’s ‘Classic Theater’ on 4 April 1898. But mere exhibitions of some moving images without any narrative could not satisfy the artistic urge of Sen. He was longing to tell some stories. In September of 1900 Hiralal bought a movie camera from London and shot two small events *Bathing in a Pond* and *Game of a Coat* in his ancestral village in Bogjuri. Then he started filming different famous scenes from the popular stage plays of ‘Classic Theater’ in Calcutta like *Alibaba*, *Sitaram*, *Bhramar*, *Mrinalini*, *Buddhadeb*, *Dolaleela*, etc. Between 1897 and 1913 Hiralal made forty such short films. He made his first full length feature film *Alibaba and Forty Thieves* based on Classic Theater’s successful stage play *Alibaba* in 1903. First advertisement films in the history of Indian cinema *Jabakusum Hair Oil* and *Edward’s Tonic* were also made by him. India’s first political film documenting the anti-partition demonstration at the ‘Town Hall’ in Calcutta on 22 September 1905 was also made by Hiralal Sen.

By then the ‘bioscope’ emerged as a profitable business and several interested persons started trying their luck in this new venture.

Jamshedji Framji Madan, a Parsi entrepreneur from Bombay, already started his bioscope shows in a temporary tent at 'Maidan' in Calcutta under the banner of his 'Elphinstone Bioscope Company'. In 1907, he established 'Elphinstone Picture Palace', the first permanent cinema hall in Calcutta. In 1919 Madan produced the first Bengali film *Bilwamangal*. But two years before that, on 26 October 1917, Hiralal Sen died only at the age of 51. His last days were miserable. His younger brother Motilal took hold of his dream project 'Royal Bioscope Company' while he was suffering from a huge financial crisis and also from cancer. A few days before his death a fire broke out destroying all films he ever had made. Unfortunately, he was lost from the history. It's good that the young generation of film activists of Bangladesh is trying to rediscover the contributions of Hiralal Sen to the history of cinema of the subcontinent.

Though the film industry was flourishing in Calcutta very rapidly and was expanding its network throughout the country with big studios, commercially successful films, exhibition chains, and other ancillaries, but in Dhaka the first effort of film production was found only in 1927 when some youngsters of the Nawab family of Dhaka took the initiative of making a short film titled *Sukumari* (The Good Girl, 1928). They entrusted the responsibility of the project to the thespian Ambuj Prasanna Gupta who was their family friend. Ambuj Gupta was the physical instructor of the famous 'Jagannath College' in Dhaka. This short silent film was completed in 1928. Male lead roles were played by Khaza Adel and Khaza Nosrullah, while the female lead was also played by a handsome male amateur actor Syed Abdus Sobhan, who became a bureaucrat in Pakistan Civil Service on later days. Cinematographer was Khaza Azad. Everyone associated with the film was from Dhaka and none of them had any early experience in film making. No studio setup was available in Dhaka at that time and the shooting was held in open air at the Nawab family's 'Dilkusha Garden'. Only one print of the film was made and it was never released for public viewing.

Success of the short film *Sukumari* (1928) motivated the Nawab family to initiate their venture

of making the first full-length feature film in Dhaka in 1929. Ambuj Prasanna Gupta was again commissioned to direct the film with Khaza Azmal as the hero. Other male actors included Sailen Roy, Khaza Nosrullah, Khaza Adel, Dhiren Ghosh, Khaza Zahir, Dhiren Majumdar, Khaza Akmol, Benu Bandyopadhyay, Syed Saheb Alam and others. Screen name of the heroine was Lolita, whose actual name was Buri. This teenaged sex worker was brought from the infamous redlight area of Dhaka, from where a couple of other sex workers like Charubala and Debabala were also hired to act in the film. Harimoti, the famous nautch girl of Dhaka that time, also played a role in the film. After a long work for two years, and by spending 12,000 Rupees, the 12 reeled first ever feature film made in Dhaka under the banner of 'Dhaka East Bengal Cinematograph Society' titled *The Last Kiss*, got released in 'Mukul Theater' (later renamed as 'Azad Theater') in 1931.



The Last Kiss (1931)

After a long break of seventeen years, the next initiative of making a film in Dhaka was found after partition of India when the governor general of Pakistan Mohammad Ali Jinnah came to visit East Pakistan in March 1948 for eleven days. To record this event the government took the initiative of

making a documentary and commissioned Nazir Ahmed for the purpose and thus the film *In Our Midst* (1948) was made and released in theaters. The famous ‘Aurora Studio’ of Calcutta supplied the technicians, camera and other equipment to make the film. Again, after a long gap of six years, Nazir Ahmed made his second film *Salamat* (1954), a 30 minutes short docu-fiction, an initiative of the government, for which the cinematographer Iqbal Mirza was brought from Lahore.

This was the time when Abdul Jabbar Khan took the initiative of making the feature film with sound in Dhaka. He adapted his own play *Dakaat* (The Robbers) to write the script for *Mukh O Mukhosh* (The Face and the Mask) and started production of the film under the banner of ‘Iqbal Films Limited’. Muhurat of the film was held on 6 August 1954 at Hotel Shahbag. The then governor of East Pakistan, Iskander Ali Mirza, inaugurated the muhurat. The film got released on 3 August 1956 at ‘Rupmahal Cinema’ in Dhaka by A. K. Fazlul Huq, the then governor of East Pakistan. Abdul Jabbar Khan not only wrote and directed the film, he also acted as the hero. Inam Ahmed, Purnima Sengupta, Nazma, and others acted in the film. *Mukh O Mukhosh* is recognized as the first full length feature film in the history of Bangladeshi cinema.

‘East Pakistan Film Development Corporation’ (later renamed as ‘Bangladesh Film Development Corporation’) was established in 1957 by the government. Since 1959 a continuous initiative of filmmaking was found there after the bilingual film *Jago Hua Sabera* (The Shall Dawn, 1959) directed by the famous Pakistani filmmaker from Lahore Akhtar Jang Kardar. Assistant Director of the film was Zahir Raihan from Dhaka. Narrative of the film was based on the Bengali novel ‘Padma Nadir Majhi’ (The Boatman of the River Padma) written by the famous Bengali writer Manik Bandyopadhyay. Screenplay of the film was written by the famous Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Tripti Mitra and Khan Ataur Rahman acted in the lead roles. The film won the Golden Medal in the Moscow International Film Festival. Ehtesham ur Rahman’s first film *E Desh Tomar Amar* (This Country belongs to You and Me, 1959), Mohiuddin’s *Matir Pahar* (The Clay Hill, 1959), and

Fateh Lohani’s *Akash Ar Mati* (The Sky and the Earth, 1959) were also released in the same year. *E Desh Tomar Amar* (1959) was the first commercially successful film made in Dhaka. Sumita Devi (Hena Bhattacharya), the first film star from Dhaka, also emerged as the most successful female actor from this film. Sumita Devi and Khan Ataur Rahman, the first popular romantic lead pair of the film industry in Dhaka was also emerged from this film. Since then, films were made both in Urdu and Bengali in Dhaka as a continuous process.



Jago Hua Sabera (1959)

Till the Indo-Pak war in 1965, Bengali films made in India were enormously popular to the Bengali audience of East Pakistan. Famous film stars of Calcutta (West Bengal, India) like Uttam Kumar, Soumitra Chattopadhyay, Suchitra Sen, Madhabi Mukhopadhyay, Sabitri Chattopadhyay, Sandhya Roy, Aparna Sen and many others had a vast fan following in the Eastern Part of Bengal. There was no problem for the Indian Bengali films to get released in East Pakistan. But the 1965 Indo-Pak war changed the situation. Both the governments in India and

Pakistan banned the films of their enemy countries, and hence, since then, the Bengali films made in Calcutta could not get released in East Pakistan any more. Urdu films made in Pakistan captured the market of East Pakistan. Dhaka also started producing more Urdu films. Syed Shamsul Haque made *Phir Milengey Hum Dono* (We Two shall Meet Again, 1966), and several others came forward.

During this period cinema became an important forum of the existential struggle of Bengali language against the aggression of Urdu language supported by the rulers of Pakistan. In this struggle the rich heritage of Bengali folk culture helped the Bengali cinema to find its way to survive. The first big success came from the film *Rupban* (1965) by Salahuddin based on a famous folk play of the same title. The next big hit was *Behula* (1966) by Zahir Raihan based on one of the most popular Bengali folk tales ‘Manasamangal Kabya’ on Behula and Lakhinder. The script of the film was written by Zahir Raihan himself where Shuchanda, Razzak, Sumita Devi, and Fateh Lohani acted in the lead roles. It was a blockbuster which helped the films made in the Bengali language in Dhaka to survive. Several others followed them which ultimately helped the Bengali cinema to strengthen its base in that land. The scenario was totally changed after the mass uprising in 1969. Perspective was prepared by Khan Ataur Rahman’s Bengali film *Nawab Sirajuddaula* (1967) based on the life of Siraj ud-Daulah, the Nawab of Bengal, who lost the Battle of Plassey in 1757 led by Robert Clive. The film was showed and acclaimed in Moscow International Film Festival and influenced the people immensely. In this context, Zahir Raihan’s pathbreaking political satire *Jiban Thekey Neyya* (Taken from the Life, 1970) based on Bengali Language Movement of 1952 got released and a whole new chapter began in the history of cinema in Bangladesh.

The Liberation War

A journalist and writer Zahir Raihan (1935-1972) stepped into cinema as an assistant director of the films *Jago Hua Savera* (The Day Shall Dawn, 1959) by Akhtar Jang Kardar and *E Desh Tomar Amar* (This

Country belongs to You and Me, 1959) by Ehtesham ur Rahman. He made his very first film *Kokhono Asheni* (Never Came, 1961) in Bengali language on his own story with Sumita Devi and Khan Ataur Rahman in the lead roles. Then after making *Sangam* (Confluence, Urdu, 1964) – the first color film from Dhaka, *Bahana* (Excuse, Urdu, 1965) – the first cinemascope film from Dhaka, and several others, Raihan made his classic *Jiban Thekey Neyya* (Taken from the Life, 1970). The film got released in April 1970, just one year before the Liberation War started. The then government of Pakistan banned the film which provoked a massive protest in that part of the country. Huge processions came out in the Dhaka city demanding release of the film unconditionally. The entire film and cultural fraternity of East Pakistan got united in solidarity.



***Stop Genocide* (1971)**

After the Liberation War started in March 1971, a group of film activists from Dhaka under the leadership of Zahir Raihan came to Kolkata, from where they tried to organize a worldwide campaign for getting the world support for the independence of their nation. The intellectuals and cultural activists of Kolkata came forward to help them by creating an organization named ‘Bangladesh Sahayak Samiti’. With the financial and logistic assistance of this organization Zahir Raihan made a 20 minutes film titled *Stop Genocide* (1971) with the voice over by Alamgir Kabir, which was acclaimed as one of the most important humane documentaries on Bangladesh Liberation War. Indira Gandhi, the then prime minister of India, was emotionally moved by watching this documentary and instructed the ‘Films

Division' of India to purchase it for international distribution. The film was very much successful to motivate the world consciousness. During the Liberation War, the provisional government of Bangladesh in exile operating from Kolkata commissioned Zahir Raihan in June 1971 to make a couple of documentaries by paying 40,000 INR. With this money, Raihan made three documentary films – *A State is Born* (1971) directed by himself, *Liberation Fighters* (1971) directed by Alamgir Kabir, and *Innocent Millions* (1971) by Babul Chowdhury. All these three films, produced by Zahir Raihan, were acclaimed as the authentic documentation of the Bangladesh Liberation War. After the war was over on 16 December 1971, while trying to find out his missing brother the acclaimed writer Shahidullah Kaiser who was captured by the Pakistani army, Zahir Raihan himself also went on missing on 30 January 1972. It is believed that the collaborators of the Pakistani army still hiding somewhere in Mirpur near Dhaka killed him brutally. It's quite unfortunate that Bangladesh lost this young and highly talented filmmaker only at the age of 37, and that too within a few days after winning the Liberation War. This was the biggest loss in the history of cinema of this newly born nation.

The most powerful cultural activist of Bangladesh Alamgir Kabir (1938-1989) went to study electrical engineering at Oxford University in England where he got attracted with cinema. He attended some courses in the British Film Institute. He also got involved with the activities of the Communist Party of England and served as the reporter of their newspaper 'Daily Worker'. He went to Cuba to interview President Fidel Castro. He also participated the liberation war of Palestine and Algeria. After coming back in Dhaka in 1966, he joined the 'Pakistan Film Society'. Many important cultural personalities of Dhaka were associated with this film society established in 1963. The Ayub Khan government arrested Alamgir Kabir for his connection with the communists. He was imprisoned but soon got released due to his British citizenship. Then he started his career as a professional journalist first in 'Pakistan Observer' and then in 'Holiday'. By that time he decided to start his own newspaper and

published 'The Express', the first tabloid from Dhaka. He founded 'Dhaka Cine Club' in 1969 and published a film society journal 'Sequence'. His first book 'Cinema in Pakistan' was also published by this time. During the Liberation War he joined the 'Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra' run by the Bangladesh government in exile in Kolkata as its chief of the English department. Here he came close to Zahir Raihan and stepped into filmmaking. Alamgir Kabir's English narration in Zahir Raihan's famous war documentary *Stop Genocide* (1971) added more value to it. Kabir then directed his first film, also a war documentary *Liberation Fighters* (1971) under Zahir Raihan's supervision on behalf of the Bangladesh government in exile. After making a couple of documentaries, Alamgir Kabir made his first feature film in Bengali *Dhire Bohe Meghna* (Quiet Flows the Meghna, 1973) on his own story and script based on the liberation war. This very first film established him as a powerful filmmaker. Babita, the famous actress of Bangladesh, played the lead role in the film. Coincidentally Babita also played the lead role in Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket* (Distant Thunder, 1973) made during the same period.



Dhire Bohe Meghna (1973)

Ray's another heroine Jayashree Roy, whom he introduced in his film *Pratidwandi* (The Adversary, 1970), played the lead role in Alamgir Kabir's next film *Surjo Kanna* (Daughter of the Sun, 1975) along with Sumita Devi and Bulbul Ahmed in other lead roles. This film brought Kabir the National Awards for best film and best director. He married Jayashree Roy and made three films consecutively

with her as the heroine. Bulbul Ahmed played as hero in these three films – *Seemana Periyē* (Across the Fringe, 1977), *Ruplai Saikate* (The Silver Beach, 1979), and *Mohona* (The Mouth of a River, 1982). *Mohona* (1982) won the Diploma of Merit in Moscow International Film Festival that year. Kabir's sixth film *Parineeta* (The Bride, 1984), based on the famous novel of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay also won the National Award that year as the best film. Ilias Kanchan, the superstar of Bangaldeshi commercial cinema, who performed in more than 300 films, acted in the lead role of this film. Kabir's seventh and last film *Mahanayak* (The Great Hero, 1985) was produced by Bulbul Ahmed, who himself played as the hero in the film.



Surja Dighal Bari (1979)

After independence, Alamgir Kabir dedicated his life for the propagation of film culture in Bangladesh. He established the 'Dhaka Film Institute' in his own house. Kabir also took the lead role in establishing the 'Bangladesh Film Institute and Archive', from where he organized four sessions of Film Appreciation Course and one Advance Course in 1981 – which was the first initiative of any such institutional film education in Bangladesh. Many of the participants of these courses later took the pioneering role in alternative film movement in Bangladesh. Alamgir Kabir was a left intellectual, a talented filmmaker, an efficient film teacher, scholar and critic, a trailblazer leader of the film society movement, and a very influential cultural personality

of Bangladesh. Unfortunately, on 20 January 1989, while returning from a film seminar, Kabir was drowned to death in Nagarbari jetty on the river Jamuna in a locked car. He was only 50. This was a huge loss in the cultural history of Bangladesh.



Titash Ekti Nadir Naam (1973)

Other noteworthy contemporary films which kept the alternative film movement in this newly born nation alive and active are *Ora Egaro Jon* (Those Eleven Persons, 1972) by Chashi Nazrul Islam, *Arunodoyer Agnishakkhi* (Witness in Sunrise, 1972) by Subhash Dutta, *Abar Tora Manush Ho* (Let You be Matured Again, 1973) by Khan Ataur Rahman, *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (A River called Titash, 1973) by Ritwik Ghatak, *Alor Michil* (Procession of Light, 1974), *Megher Onek Rong* (Many Colours of the Cloud, 1976) by Harunur Rashid, *Golapi Ekhn Trene* (Golapi in Train Now, 1978) by Amjad Hossain, *Sareng Bou* (Wife of a Naval Crew, 1978) by Abdullah Al Mamun, and many more. First two films directly financed by the Government of Bangladesh in the form of a grant-in-aid were very important in the history of cinema of this country. First one was *Surja Dighal Bari* (The Ominous House, 1979) by Mashiuddin Shaker and Sheikh Niamat Ali which brought international recognition to Bangladeshi cinema. It bagged seven National Awards including the best film and best director of the year. And the second one was *Emiler Goyendabahini* (The Spy-force of Emil, 1980), acclaimed as the first children's film of Bangladesh. It also bagged five National Awards including the best film of the year. Besides *Surja Dighal Bari*,

Sheikh Niamat Ali made two more important films as a solo director – *Dahan* (Affliction, 1985) and *Anya Jibon* (Another Life, 1995) which won several awards. Syed Salahuddin Zaki's *Ghuddi* (The Kite, 1980) also played a significant role in the history of cinema in Bangladesh. This was the first film of the country influenced by the French Nouvelle Vague. After that the film industry in Bangladesh went under the control of commercial cinema for a long time where we found a deep influence of the mainstream commercial Indian cinema, especially the Bengali and Hindi films made in Kolkata and Mumbai respectively. Fabulous commercial success of Tojammel Haque Bokul's *Beder Meye Josna* (Josna - the Daughter of a Snake Charmer, 1989) took the trend to the highest level producing many more popular commercials. Zahir Raihan and Alamgir

Kabir's untimely death also was an important reason for the absence of good cinema in Bangladesh during this period. But the scenario soon changed when three contemporary students of the Dhaka University – Tareque Masud, Tanvir Mokammel, and Morshedul Islam, all disciples of Alamgir Kabir, came forward to make films and lead a new film movement which took Bangladeshi cinema beyond borders and earned accolades from all over the world. International recognition of present Bangladeshi cinema initially earned by these three highly talented filmmakers subsequently generated a bandwagon of several other accomplished filmmakers about whom we shall discuss in the next part of this article.

(To be continued)

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