LSE-UC Berkeley Bangladesh Summit

February 2019
Forms of Sovereignty: Art, Cinema, and Popular Culture

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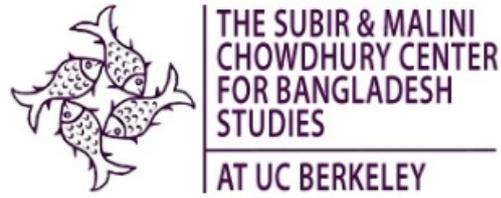
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Working Paper 3: Forms of Sovereignty: Art, Cinema, and Popular Culture

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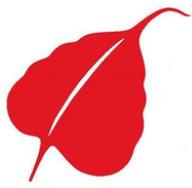
Panellists

- Madhuja Mukherjee, Film Studies, Jadavpur University
- Nusrat Sabina Chowdhury, Anthropology, Amherst College
- Lotte Hoek, Social Anthropology, University of Edinburgh

Moderator

- Sugata Ray, History of Art, UC Berkeley

Introduction

L-R: Madhuja Mukherjee, Lotte Hoek, Nusrat Sabina Chowdhury, Sugata Ray

The People's Republic of Bangladesh, a nation established in 1972 following its secession from Pakistan, is somewhat of a plasmatic place. Being situated directly at the world's largest delta, riverine silt thus forming much of its land, indeed 'the land of rivers' known as Bangladesh is a country of geomorphic fluidity.

Indeed, Bangladesh is a site of cultural, political, religious, and social fluidity. How does such a mercurial nation negotiate collective identity? The panel on Forms of Sovereignty: Art, Cinema, and Popular Culture in the 2019 LSE/UC Berkeley Bangladesh Summit proposed different and complex notions of sovereignty in Bangladesh that were articulated through cinema, popular culture, and digital media.

The papers in the panel suggested that notions of sovereignty in Bangladesh are shifting and aqueous but rooted in deep political, social, and cultural practices. For South Asia, cinema has strong significance in these three contexts. Thus, as the panel moderator, Sugata Ray, reminded us in his introductory comments, cinematic arts play a fundamental role in South Asian claims to sovereignty.

Indeed, all three papers in the panel highlighted how understanding cinema and other digital artistic platforms within a broader and more porous framework is key to visualizing a more nuanced and multi-directional approach to Bangladeshi selfhood.

The speakers demonstrated that considering cinema and digital culture via the ways in which it is perceived, shared, and displayed among different audiences and in different contexts are some of the ways to comprehend, articulate, and theorize sovereignty in Bangladesh.

Text, Speech, Idiom: Landscape, Language and the Meandering Flow of River Films

In "Text, Speech, Idiom: Landscape, Language and the Meandering Flow of River Films", a presentation that focuses primarily on A.J. Kardar's Jago Hua Savera, a 1959 Pakistani film loosely based on a 1936 novel that tells the story of the daily life of fishermen on the Padma River in East Bengal, Madhuja Mukherjee raised questions about reception, authorship, and identity in national cinema.

Further, she prompted us to consider the complex ways in which one might attempt to define national cinema, and what the benefits and limitations of doing so might be.

Poetically, water—in form of the calm and complacent, meandering river as well as the toilsome and unrelenting monsoon rain—was a symbolic theme for Mukherjee as she explored some of the emotional and experiential aspects of Bangladeshi life.

For Bangladesh, however, a country that was officially part of Pakistan until 1971, part of India until 1947, and to this day shares language, cultural practices, and familial connections with India's eastern state of West Bengal, collective national identity is not a clear-cut form.

We are led to wonder: is Jago Hua Savera—a predominantly Urdu language film shot in (what is now) Bangladesh, with local and Indian actors and an international crew at a time when the country was still part of Pakistan— indeed representative as a Pakistani film?

Or, given that the film depicts Bengali rural life in quintessence, had a largely Bengali cast, features Bengali songs (without subtitles), and was filmed on the silty soil of East Bengal, is Jago Hua Savera a national cinematic emblem of Bangladesh?

A film that has been identified as their own by both Pakistan and Bangladesh complicates our understanding of national sovereignty in a place as politically, socially, and geographically liquescent as Bangladesh.

Through showing the ways in which Jago Hua Savera, along with other films such as Padma Nadir Majhi (1992) and Monpura (2009), illustrates this entanglement, Mukherjee emphasized the need to re-think the politics and nation-state-citizen dynamics as well as social/cultural praxes of work, power relations, religion, community, gender, language and law that frame notions of the local and national cinemas for not only Bangladesh, but for Pakistan and India as well.

The Curious Case of the Chief Justice: Technologies of Rumors and Political Power and Bangladesh

Modern technologies, particularly digital social media networks, have played a critical— if not formidable—role in global connectivity, solidarity, and community. Circulation has become easier, faster, and more accessible than ever while the task of censoring this circulation has correspondingly become more difficult.

Relying on this virtual hyper-connectivity and the growing limits of censorship, a form of political propaganda, termed "rumor terrorism", has taken shape.

These shifts have precipitated other social mechanisms such as conspiratorial gossip, organized mass protests, and feelings of affinity among the general public. Nusrat S. Chowdhury's talk, "The Curious Case of the Chief Justice: Technologies of Rumors and Political Power and Bangladesh," centered around these themes as it addressed a chain of events regarding the twenty-first Chief Justice of Bangladesh, Surendra Kumar Sinha, in 2017.

This scandal—originally fueled by Sinha's proclamation in the verdict that "no nation, no country, is made of or by one person"—involved strategic political smearing and the percolation of rumor terrorism, protesting masses, a mysterious forced leave, and a "curious" forged signature. While Chowdhury argued that the intended aim of Sinha's claim was to "salvag[e] the spirit of a collectivity that played a formative role in the struggle towards independence,"
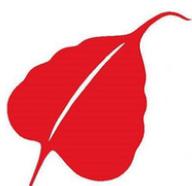
his words— spread and consumed via social media— backfired with collective criticism and reproach from the public. On the one hand, Sinha's detractors, mostly in political power at the moment, highlighted these particular words, and the verdict in general, to paint him as unstable, incapable, and even insane.

On the other hand, Sinha's emphasis on the "we-ness" of Bangladesh was fiercely questioned and was read as a snub against the contemporary dominant political narrative in Bangladesh. The layers of irony in this situation illustrate that although Sinha's words ultimately cost him his position, they also revealed the complex relationship between authoritarian power and digital mediation. Chowdhury's paper demonstrated the ways in which the intersections of politics and technology— including censorship, rumor terrorism, and social media connectivity— have often reified, rather than dissipated, conflicting ideas of the people.

Film in Fields

The theme of who "the people" are was further developed by Lotte Hoek in her presentation titled "Film in Fields." Hoek raised questions about accessibility, viewership, and place in the context of cinematic exhibitionary practices. She argued that non-theatrical, noncommercial modes of screening films, particularly in East Pakistan and Bangladesh from the 1960s to the 1980s, allowed cinema to become an affective, community-building art form.

Beyond the content of film, cinema exhibition became a politically charged practice. With an energetic new awareness of peripheral solidarities at this time, it may not be completely coincidental that these exhibitionary practices coincided with the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement, a forum of sovereignty among the Global South established in 1961.
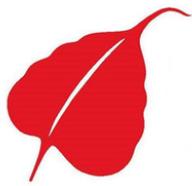
The use of 16- millimeter film, rather than the standard 35-millimeter film used in commercial cinema, was one tactic employed by the Film Society Movement that ensured that these films were compatible with non-commercial, non-theatrical settings.

Using the reworking by Bangladeshi filmmaker Molla Sagar of the 1973 film Titash Ekti Nadir Naam, directed by Ritwik Ghatak, as a point of departure for her presentation, Hoek discussed the practice of projecting films onto screens in the open air.

Sometimes in empty school fields, at public village spaces, or on docked fishing boats in the delta, these screenings were subject to the elements of nature. This form of viewership, in turn, created a space for collective experience, that have been used for political effect by the East Pakistani state, film activistis and artists.

Screening and spectatorship are an essential aspect of cinematic cultures; thus, Hoek's presentation prompted us to consider what it means to screen outside of a cinema hall—replete with tickets, ordered seating designations, and codes of conduct—for open spaces that were familiar and inviting to school children, farmers, and fisher folk.

The open-air screening could bring together a different audience constellation that could be considered as a concrete embodiment of 'the people', the empty space identified by Claude Lefort as that which needs to be filled in democratic modes of governance.
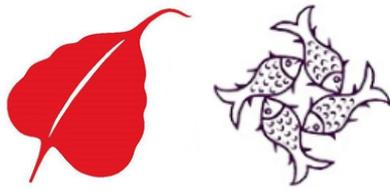
Conclusion

The three presentations in this panel demonstrated the necessity to rethink cinema and digital culture as a nuanced and complex art form, a political platform, a symbol of modernity and nationhood, and an affective field for a broad, inclusive audience.

The three speakers opened up ways to situate cinematic form and vision within an expanded field that connects politics, aesthetics, and technology. Themes of circulation, whether it be the literal circulation of reels, the circulation of digital media through WhatsApp and Facebook, or film screenings on the water, were a prominent aspect in this panel, prompting careful consideration of how modernity has interacted and intersected with Bangladeshi identity and livelihood.

The speakers ruminate on the possibilities of what happens when cinema and digital media trickles and flows into the world via alternative, or even subversive, ways.

Thinking of hyper-connectivity, censorship, and accessibility, the panel considered how both the materiality and the digitality of cinema and other media allow, or do not allow, control over the perception, reception, and circulation of certain content.

Above all, however, the panel opens the conversation to the question: does sovereignty require a sense of unity, a collective and uniform identity? In the case of Bangladesh, we find that sovereignty is defined through its diversity, fluidity, and ambiguity; in these aspects, the nation finds its peoplehood.