

# **Current reality of documentary film making in Bangladesh: A perspective from creative economy**

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## **Abstract**

Recently, there is a subtle movement among some young Bangladeshis to focus on documentary film making. Especially during the age digital technology the young independent soap opera directors, who used to produce for TV are making documentaries for over decades. Through thematic analysis of in-depth interviews of 11 documentary film makers and 2 public and private university faculties – this paper suggests the creative economic aspect of the documentary film-making in Bangladesh. This paper finds that, although there are films and television studies departments in private and public universities and a good number of committed film makes, however documentary film industry could not be able to take a shape and the economy of documentary making is still at the hand of practitioners, however it is a prospective sector of creative economy in Bangladesh.

**Key Words :** Documentary film making, Bangladesh, reality, creative economy

## **1. Research Aims and Introduction:**

The trend of documentary film making started with the liberation war in 1971 –however it was not a regular practice of film industry in Bangladesh. Alamgir Kabir, the veteran freedom fighter film maker inspired the young generation's 70's and therefore a group of documentary film makers came out during 80's and 90's. There were lot of barrier at that time like lack of schooling, access to expensive technology and tools and screening no marketing scope and no funds.

As time passed, in 2015 award winning 'Are you Listening' film was in shown in theatre for 4 weeks. Though, this one is a rare case only, however documentary making becomes part of profession of young multimedia producers and directors. At present, during the era of digital film making technology some of the young film makers making documentaries on different issues, mostly as a part of their profession. This paper would like give an account of documentary film genre and its economy in Bangladesh. Unfortunately there is not enough literature available on documentary film and its practice in Bangladesh. Both the researchers had to work on their first hand data those are in-depth interviews of 13 persons who are working in this field.

## **2.Methodology:**

As we have already mentioned, for this paper the researcher have taken in-depth interviews of 11 documentary film makers and 2 faculties. Film makers were selected from generation of 80's to currently media school graduates. For avoiding gender biasness 3 women film makers were interviewed in the process as well. We used thematic analysis to analyze data from transcripts. We started with some key concepts like challenges and their available remedies. Through open coding we found more varied concepts like perception of documentary not as cinema and its practice and public and private sector efforts resumes funding documentary films by adding it in their funding policy/ program. And finally there are scope to use new media technology to create market and culture in practice and in academic setting, like communications and film schools.

## **3.Historical perspective of the documentary film as a creative media in Bangladesh:**

It was always independent effort to make documentary in Bangladesh and it is till now. The history of documentary film making says that Nazir Ahmed, a radio broadcaster made first documentary film 'Salamat' in 1953 when there was no film industry in Bengal until 1957. He made 'Salamat' based on story centered on the life of a construction worker, who saw the changes of new capital city of Dhaka. And after that a studio and laboratory went in to operation in 1955 in Tejgaon, Dhaka by the initiative of government. Later on the Film Development Corporation (F.D.C.) was established by the legislation of East Bengal Provincial Assembly in 1958. It opened a new horizon for the film industry of Bangladesh. However FDC could not contribute for documentary film, did not make any documentary as well, if was confined to produce fiction film until the liberation war of 1971.

During the year of Bangladesh liberation war, 1971 a good number of documentary film been made by exiled Bangladeshi film makers. As number of director artist-technicians took part in this war it obviously inspired them to make documentary on the war and struggle to inform international community. Of them Zahir Raihan -made a documentary Stop Genocide, (20 mins), depicting the oppression, of Pakistani Military, plight of the refugees and heroic struggle of freedom fighters. During that time the exile Bangladesh government formed in west Bengal, India developed a film unit and several documentary films were produced from the unit on liberation war. Zahir Raihan made 7 documentaries from his own independent efforts from 2 different organizations. Alamgir Kabir, another veteran film maker of Bangladesh, made 4 documentaries - *Ek Sagar Rakter Binimoye* (At the Cost of a Sea of Blood) is one of them. Actually, he immensely contributed to Zahir Raihan's making of masterpieces including 'Stop Genocide' during the War of Liberation.

In the post-independence period, Zahir Raihan went missing, as a part of plan of the Pakistani army collaborators and war criminals. With the support FDC and government fund a good number of feature film maker emerged. As a part of promoting mass culture and representing society documentary film never get attention to the policy makers and government institutions. Therefore FDC's or mainstream film industry's productions evolved with fiction / feature film, marketing and revenue. Therefore FDC or government could not contribute to this key part of cinema culture. Therefore, fact-based, non-fictional documentary film making has no place in Bangladesh. Not in theaters, not on TVs.

However, a new generation of film maker emerged in 80's Tarek Masud, Tanvir Mukammel, Shameem Akhter, Yasmine Kabir, Enayet Karim Babul, Mustafa Kamal, Tarek Shahriar, appeared on the cinematic frontier with new visions under the leadership of director teacher Alamgir Kabir. They started the short film movement which was an extension of film club movement. Tarek Masud, Tanvir Mukammel and Yasmine Kabir earned their fame as a documentary film maker, however it was out of focus, mostly off track efforts. Although there was organization like DFP ( Department of Film and Publications), they used to produce news real and government propaganda non- fiction films – as it was shaped on British colonial legacy and government mechanism. They hardly produce audio visual representation of activities but did not turn their work into a documentary cinema practice. BTV, as a public broadcasting organization followed the same footsteps.

During this period a few short films (includes documentaries as well) received grants from international grant-making agencies or sponsorship of foreign cultural missions based in Dhaka. Japan Foundation and EMW, Germany/ German Cultural Grants are a few of them. Actually the Goethe Institut in Dhaka also sponsored a number of documentary film projects such as *Dhaka Tokai* (*Dhaka Tokai*, 1986), *Dhaka Rickshaw* (*Dhaka Rickshaw*, 1986) and *One Day in Krishnanagar* (*Krishnanagare Ekdin*). The film started at 1989 and the project came out in 1993.

And *One Day in Krishnanagar* (54 min, 1993) was the first ever organized documentary film making effort which was made by three committed directors, Manzarehassin Murad, Tanvir Mokammel and Tareque Masud. This 53-minute film speaks about a day's struggle by fishermen, to keep themselves and their families alive.

The film not only shows the hard labour and constant prayers by the fishermen, but also their spiritual aspirations, dreams and their moments of leisure are moulded into this sensitive presentation. It was jointly produced by the Bangladesh Short Film Forum, Goethe Institut, Munich. This film is a land mark in the history of documentary film of Bangladesh. However, even during the high tide of film society movement documentary film remains off track or secondary topic in their culture. Even the history of Cinema of Bangladesh did not recognize contribution of Nazir Ahmed and 'Salamat' as a pioneer work; rather they mentioned 'Mukh O Mukhosh' by Abdul Jabbar Khan as a pioneer film of Bengal.

The social reformist film maker Alamgir Kabir and its follower developed new alternative film culture and movement during this time. And the in the meantime Tarek Masud's *Adam Surot* ( Inner Strength, 1982), Muktir Gaan (Songs of Freedom,1995), Tanvir Mokammel's *Swapnabhumi* (Promise Land, 2007), Yasmin Kabir's *My Migrant Soul* (2000) – recognized by the International community as they were been awarded by different film festivals and create taste of festival growers audience in alternative film culture. Although there were lack of schooling, access to expensive technology and tools and screening and lack of marketing knowledge, their latent talents were recognized through their master pieces. However, all these are independent efforts and could not create any market except screening in festivals.

During early 90's NGO based documentary film making starts. And video technology came in development organizations. It allowed some of the film makers to work documentary films and keep going on. However, the reality is, other than the NGO commissions to make propaganda films, there is no fund as such any creative documentaries. During this period under the leadership of Manzarehassin Murad a group of young documentary film makers emerged and most importantly some of them are women and they have started working in NGO's and private televisions.

Some of these young filmmakers started working together to popularize Documentary Film in Bangladesh and formed Bangladesh Documentary Council (BDC) since 2004. They are organizing a National Documentary Film Festival of selective Bangladeshi documentary films since 2005 in each two year which make distinctions from 2 other locally organized international film festivals. At the same time they have been organizing seminars and workshops and screenings for creating the space of documentary films. But the most important work they are doing is publications quality catalog of documentary film from Bangladesh at the time of festivals since 2005. However, interesting point is more than 100 young documentary film makers have taken the job of making documentary as a part of their profession. They do not belong to any organizations. They are just freelancers. This 100 plus young film makers see it as 100% profit oriented creative job. Even sometimes it is more profitable than making TV commercials. These freelancers does not even care about broadcasting their film on TV.

Though, in the era of broadcasting TV there are more than two dozen private TV channel active now in Bangladesh and a section of them are news channels. Since 2009 Jamuna TV set up a documentary film unit for the first time in the history of TV channel in Bangladesh and until today it produced 13 documentaries films of its own. Another private TV channel Ekattor TV have produced 30 plus documentaries and they run a weekly slot of documentary film since their on air starting from 2011. In addition 2 other TV channels (*Dipto* and *Desh TV*) broadcast documentary irregularly. However, they could not produce or create a market of documentary and most of the channel does not pay film makers for broadcasting their work.

#### **4.Results/ Findings & Discussion:**

In Bangladesh the notion of independent film is not really establish, therefore the place of documentary is far behind indeed. It is always an independent and individuals efforts and passion that keep the genre alive. And it is a matter of wonder that the documentary film makers of did not get enough technical schooling and facilities to make films of international standard and even they did not have financial support from government or any other organizations as well. But they made films with their own funds and the subject matter of their films were unique which could draw the attention of the international audiences as well. The emergence of digital technology increases the access to making documentary film only. At this time from the government side a fund for documentary film allotted since 2012, however marketing and distributions are still far off. The only scope left with to show films in the festivals.

The first challenge about documentary film is perception of policy maker and public. Manzarehassin Murad, one of the senior documentary film maker of the country, analyzed that there is historical gap about perception of documentary film in Bangladesh. Documentaries are yet to be understood and recognized as cinema and art form. Junaid Ahmed Halim, award winning editor and founding Chair of film and TV department of one of the public university in Bangladesh opined that 'First challenge is knowledge about the media, people and policy level people do not know what is documentary. Why a documentary film is important? How a documentary film could bring about the reality and dream of certain community or society? Industry is there, those are mainly propaganda films for development NGO's not for public at all'.

As to the practice of Non-Government Organization (NGO)'s and government institution like Department of Film and Publications (DFP) or Bangladesh Television (BTV), it is regarded

as non-fiction visual documentation, audio visual representation of activities or educative motivational tool. It is always regarded as secondary practice in cinema. However, reality is documentary plays role in social and cultural transformation. As feature and fiction film could not reflect the society as a whole, without documentary practice the cinema in culture as a medium or reality will be half hatred.

The biggest challenges producing documentaries in Bangladesh finding local fund including professional producers. Actually, in the traditional film finance there is very limited funding opportunities for any kind of independent production. Therefore the room for a documentary is really absurd. In addition, people are yet to understand the role of a producer here and it is mixed up often with the role of a financier; and documentaries are yet to be understood and recognized as cinema. And yet, after making, the bigger challenge lies ahead in distributing the film. Traditional distribution system will not screen a film of shorter than 150 minutes and of any other genre than so-called commercial films.

According to some young film makers, at least 100 freelancers' teams are making documentary films at present as a part of their profession. They are technically organized and have schooling of documentary making. Most of them are from middle class family. So they are making documentary films to earn their livelihood. They are mainly making documentaries for some NGO who just make film for a particular group of people or to document their projects and submit it for the fund hunting in donor's organizations with their portfolios. That is why they are not able to reach to a huge audiences.

As Parthib Rashed, a young documentary maker, sees 'A film maker can make two feature films in a year which is supposed to need 2 to 5 crore to make a feature film and from there he can earn 5 to 10 lac BD taka. But there are lot of chances to face a great loss. By making TVC he can earn 50 thousand taka whereas daily soap will bring him 50 -70 thousand taka. But one can earn at least 50 thousand taka from documentary film whereas the total budget of the film is just one lac taka. A documentary maker can make 10 to 15 documentaries in a single year'. The reality is, they have a little marketing knowledge to sell their products. Private TV channels buy films at a little rate from the makers. Hence, documentary makers can not do their best as they are not recognized or acclaimed for their works.

On the other hand private TV's would like to make profit. Therefore, they do not recognize documentary as the medium do not have any commercial value like soap opera or fictions. They organize talk shows as it is less expensive it could easily fill the air time. The researcher might be one of the lucky documentary film maker who got 20k (USD 250) from a private TV for broadcasting his one documentary. Even few private TV who are making documentaries they have their own agenda and self-censorship policy. Another senior documentary maker Aminur Rahman shared another reality that as the NGO's funding dried up NGO based development documentary market is down too. And finally reality is trained young graduates from difference communication schools finally end up in feature film as well, as there is no future in documentary film making.

Baratto Amin, one of prominent documentary film maker opined that government has to come up with documentary broadcasting rules for TV's. There exits 27 channels in the country. TV's should have commitment to promote documentary to serve the masses. Corporates could play role from their CSR activities to boost up the genre. In addition film societies and clubs, art culture academy (Shilpokla ) could play a role to take documentaries to the people and spread the culture. Farid Ahmad, another film maker and producer of TV opined that govt. have to bring change in the policy of FDC, DFP and TV.

Sazzad Hossain, a film school graduate and Sr. lecturer in a private University, media studies department think that film makers have to think from new perspective. How they could use new media technology and reach their own audience and become commercially successful. They need to change the language of documentary for the same. A mass group of people are connected with android mobile network; they have prepare themselves to take this scope. Junaid Halim much more optimistic and opined that it could be a huge industry within few years if the young generation could make it a dynamic form for expression. And it is obvious.

Manzarehassin Murad pointed that there is only one award for documentary film in National level, where as in neighbouring country India scenario is different. There are different levels of award for documentaries in national level. Government have to think about it. As to him policy level people have to take documentary seriously first. Shabnom Ferdousi, a Sr. TV producer and documentary maker asked for integrated efforts from the public and private sector to bring a change in the film culture of Bangladesh. And as to her, policy level people have to change their mind first- to give a scope to documentary. According to Sara Afrin, the filmmakers are bound to find alternative way to distribute the films by themselves.

## **5.Conclusion :**

As to reality, the present market of documentary films in our country is without any doubt holding a very miserable condition comparing to other neighboring countries like India, Thailand who are trying to establish a well demandable market around the world by making some epoch making documentary films. They have good schooling in making documentary as there are many renowned universities from where they can meet with modern technology of film making.

However, documentary has its archival value, even though a documentary has not been well made. The reality is Bangladeshi cinema got recognition and award in international film festival, 70 per cent of them are documentaries. This is emerging creative economy sector in Bangladesh. Although this format is not even one third of the feature or fiction films productions. Government are giving fund to 3 short documentaries in recent times. For the first time since funding started for film in 1978, this year government allocated fund for one feature length documentary, however it is only 40 % of the fiction film segment. Young film makers of Bangladesh already have shown strength and prospect of documentary films in Bangladesh. TV channels, especially news channels, could take the scope of documentary to create views of masses. However, they have to add active policy in the planning. Until then film maker have to take the challenge to show the power of documentary as most entraining, political and effective means of spreading message and social reform.

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