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The mysterious whereabouts. Dodging the film censors in Bangladesh

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The mysterious whereabouts

dodging the film censors in Bangladesh

The Bangladeshi cinema industry is reeling from the effects of satellite television and cheap technologies for media reproduction. Faced with legislation incapable of protecting them from foreign competition and censorship rules dating from before the satellite era, Bangladeshi film producers are turning to illegal practices to keep their reels rolling.

Lotte Hoek

Two days before the film *Cruelty* (not its real name) was to be reviewed by the Bangladesh Film Censor Board, the producer met with his director, choreographer and chief editor. Locking the door behind them, they reviewed every reel of the 13,000 feet of celluloid and culled all scenes that might offend the censors. Sexually explicit images and dialogues were cut, as were references to political violence and overt criticism of the government; the omitted bits of celluloid were stored in tins marked 'cut-pieces'. The film's pruned form was then sent to the censor board. After a few weeks and a number of additional cuts, *Cruelty* was certified for release.

As the release date approached, the cut-pieces were taken out of storage and assistant directors were ordered to splice them back into the film. Which cut-pieces were retained depended on the copy's destination. If the cinema hall was in the capital Dhaka, only the least explicit were left in; if the destination was far in the countryside, more cut-pieces were retained. Thus the film materialised in 20 different forms, each copy a little more illegal than the next.

The film became a great success. Wherever it was shown, news of the extraordinary cut-pieces spread like wildfire. Young men lined up to see *Cruelty*; few Bangladeshi movies had seen such success in years. Entertainment correspondents of the broadsheet newspapers and tabloids alike penned indignant rejections of the 'vulgar' film, lamenting the state of the film industry, awash with cut-pieces, and urging the censor board to take its task more seriously. Aware of the blatant flouting of its regulations, the censor board sent its inspectors to cinema halls in distant rural areas, but to no effect. The cut-pieces causing the uproar were nowhere to be found.

Cruelty is just one among many Bangladeshi films in which cut-pieces are found. In fact, most mainstream commercial films in Bangladesh make use of them. These cut-pieces are celluloid traces of the effects that the transnational movement of images has on a national film industry. As states have difficulty policing global media, they attempt to control producers within their borders; the latter respond to state regulations and the pressures of their newly competitive environment with practices that are not strictly legal.



Side-actor shows a cut-piece

Paul James Gomes

The celluloid trace

The availability of foreign audiovisual media in Bangladesh has grown rapidly over the past two decades. When video first arrived in Bangladesh in the 1980s, it caused panic in the cinema industry, which faced foreign competition for the first time. In 1986, the president of the Bangladesh Motion Pictures Exhibitors Association threatened to violate the Cinematograph Act; members warned they would show uncertified and decertified Indian and Pakistani films in their cinema halls if the government did nothing to protect them against illegal competition. Flouting the law seemed necessary as the local film industry was being hit by 'easily available VHS showing attractive Indian and Blue Films at cheaper rates....'¹

Celluloid on the editing table

Paul James Gomes



The association also complained of 'the rampant showing of uncertified Indian films in the bordering districts. The latest Indian movies are just smuggled into this side of the border....'² The censor board responded by affirming that both the public showing of VHS and uncertified films is prohibited and is punishable with up to three years' imprisonment.

Twenty years later, only the scale of the problem has changed. Satellite television,³ DVDs, VCDs and the internet have followed video into the remotest corners of the country. The films and television series, as well as the software and video games (at 10 to 200 Taka apiece, or about 0.12 to 2.50 Euro) are neither copyrighted nor certified, while the laws remain largely unchanged and ineffectual. Amidst this vastly expanded illegal flow of moving images, most film producers have given up trying to convince the censor board to protect them from foreign competition. Instead, they have adapted their filmmaking and exhibiting practices to the new conditions.

The strategy adopted by film producers can be called the 'cut-piece method'. To create demand for their films, producers include sexually explicit sequences that they do not present to the censor board, as the code clearly states that films should not contain immoral and obscene acts including 'kissing, hugging, embracing, etc, which should not be allowed in films of Indo-Bangladesh origin for this violates accepted canons of cultures of those countries.'⁴ Rather than put these sequences before the Board, the producers keep them behind, editing them back into the body of the film once it has received its censor certificate. Through a network of representatives, local contacts and assistants, the film producers keep an eye on the local authorities to judge the likelihood of a raid on a hall. They then decide in which cinema halls, where and when, to show these cut-pieces. Posters and trailers inform audiences that the new film might contain especially attractive cut-pieces. Film producers consider those who cannot watch erotic audiovisuals within their homes as their prime audience for cut-pieces. The strategy unfailingly brings a small margin of profit. Like erotica and pornography elsewhere, little investment can yield huge profits.

Case pending

Neither the government nor the censor board has tried to regulate the immense influx of uncertified and uncensored

of the cut-pieces



Actress Shaila built her career around cut-piece controversy Paul James Gomes



Announcing 'spicy' Eid films Paul James Gomes

audiovisual material that infringes copyright. Instead they focus on irregularities in Bangladeshi cinema production and exhibition: inspectors travel the country while police are required to report irregularities within cinema halls. When cut-pieces are found, the censor board files a lawsuit against the producer, director, actors and film exhibitors. Seventy such cases were pending at the end of 2005, all filed by the censor board against films on grounds of 'obscenity' and 'vulgarity'. The oldest of these cases, from 2002, is nowhere near resolution. Rarely is a producer fined or a film banned outright.

The producer and director of *Cruelty* feel their admittedly illegal activities are warranted. When asked, they point to television and the omnipresent discs that often feature more sexually explicit material than the sequences in *Cruelty*. If the government and the censor board take no action against their producers, why should the cut-pieces in *Cruelty* be seized and banned? Besides, if they didn't use the cut-piece method, the

whole Bangladeshi film industry would collapse under pressure of Indian and American films, blue or any other colour. In their view, cut-pieces are perhaps illegal, but their use is clearly licit.

Cut-pieces are thus the visible result of the largely unregulated transnational media presence in Bangladesh. The Censorship of Films Act, Rules and Code can no longer protect the national cinema industry from foreign competition; nor can it deter producers' strategies to protect their interests. Caught in the realm of transnational media flows, film producers in Bangladesh resort to cut-pieces to resist both the censor board and foreign competition. ◀

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Notes

1. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Undated. Manual on Censorship of Films Act, Rules & Code with Amendments; Cinematograph Act and Rules, with Amendments; Film Clubs Registration & Regulation Act and Rules and Various Notifications, Orders, etc. Dhaka: Ministry of Information, p.109.
2. Ibid.
3. On the shadowy legality of satellite television in Bangladesh see: Page, David and William Crawley. 2001. Satellite over South Asia: Broadcasting, Culture and the Public Interest. Dhaka: University Press Ltd.
4. Manual on Censorship of Films Act, p.34.

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