

Making of the Popular

Production of Culture and Discourses in Bangladesh

Manosh Chowdhury

Jahangirnagar University

Series in Anthropology



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*The outstanding mentor
with unparallel insight and pervasive vision*
Professor Burhanuddin Khan Jahangir

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Preface and Acknowledgement

Right after the Covid-19 reconfiguration of leisure, livelihood, and lives, and right after I digitally ‘met’ Carmen Blyth, an independent author and researcher, I wished (fantasized more precisely) to have several English products under my belt. Finding Carmen was not a coincidence; at least, this is exactly what cyberspace is propagated for. In this case, it is truthful to say that she found me, a very unlikely event in human history, especially when I hardly wrote anything significant in English by that date. Her search (for a random me) coincided with perhaps a few less important issues, and I started nurturing my wish. So, I kept on sending ‘mini’ proposals to many publishers. Nobody should be surprised to know that most of them were turned down, a good thing about ‘corporate’ (forget about the University Press tags where applicable, well they maintain a similar bureaucracy, too) publishers is that they ‘respond’, something their ‘left-leaning’ counterparts do not even bother to. I happily kept on resending and re-resending them to other publishers once I received an email (with a no, of course). A complete list could irritate even the calmest of readers.

Now, my readers deserve to know that I have a serious ‘bias’ toward the ‘left-leaning’ publishers, even knowing the fact of their apparent snobbery or inefficiency. So, my hunt for many publishers for many products naturally involved a few left-leaning publishers, too. And it took an unnecessarily longer time because of the simple fact that I could not even receive a ‘no’ after waiting for months. In the whole process, the only ‘mini proposal’ that was accepted in the first attempt was a book roughly about or around films, scheduled to be published by the same publisher. I kept on missing deadlines and rescheduling them again. I never started writing that ‘imagined book’. As I started feeling the heat, I was about to tell the publisher to abandon the contract instead. In the process, I started realizing that I needed to publish this manuscript first, or at least to sign a contract for this one to sensibly move forward for anything I wish (or fantasize). I wrote two lines about this manuscript and let the contact person know. I was advised to send a formal proposal. It worked, and this is how this years-old manuscript is getting published.

Why do many publishers turn down a book proposal, or, in many other cases, do not even respond to a query, and, in an ever-growing tendency, ask the authors to find what they define as ‘acquisitions editors’, or regional editors by some other agencies, and make things far more complicated for an author, especially from the Global South, let alone an author like me who never approached writing in English, is altogether an academic query to me, and needs serious investigation. The first and foremost reason is a simple one – the

big agencies have numerous requests to respond to, and they need to discourage many 'unsolicited submissions'. The second reason, however, is not that simple and involves the disparity and hierarchy in the publishing industry in defining the probable authors. It goes further when we consider the ever-growing principles of the academic global order in a tightly scrutinized and almost monolingual fashion. Things are much more complicated when it comes to journal publication tendencies and differ significantly in hard and natural sciences or applied and business (and commerce-related) disciplines. But until and unless the global superstar academics start talking over these issues (especially the prejudices and disparity), these may be groaning by a newcomer in the field.

That I had started writing solely in the local language, Bangla more precisely, in a very early stage of my career, in 1995, has nothing to do directly with the global scenario I am now much concerned about. It was not felt this way back then to be honest. I rather wanted a strong base of social studies in the local language. I came from a small-town Bangla medium secondary school and could have played a bit, but only a bit. It was a pedagogical outlet that I then thought of upholding. And I wrote a lot in the local language. Still, this manuscript, or a version of it, should and could have been published long back, but never it was, due to a series of mundane and interesting stories. For a few years, I thought of publishing it from a local study circle publisher led by an unbelievably capable professor. Then, the study group was struggling with personnel and finance. I then decided to publish its Bangla translation and never found the impetus to translate it by myself into Bangla. Then I shelved it for years only to have a wake-up call during the Covid-19 period, as I told you earlier. So, Carmen Blyth deserves my first gratitude.

The first version of this manuscript was my doctoral dissertation. My doctoral journey has some other stories, too, but I will not burden this preface with my biographic notes. The study was possible under the MEXT scholarship scheme of the government of Japan. I thank the authority for offering me a graduate scholarship during 2004-2007. Professor Masahiko Togawa, my supervisor, found a friendly and non-confronting way to deal with his first-ever doctoral student. I thank him for his relaxed approach to me. Arpana Awwal, a creative teacher of English literature, took care of my English at a time when I could not do any justice to her service. Also, I am grateful to my (Bangla) readers and publishers. They are not many in numbers, but they are crucial for me in keeping my focus for these long years. After all, I am not believed as an easygoing author for the readers.

Manosh Chowdhury
Adabor, Dhaka, Bangladesh
27 December 2023

List of Acronyms

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
BANBEIS	Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics
BAPA	Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bangladesh Environment Movement)
BAT	British American Tobacco
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BELA	Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BTC	Bangladesh Tobacco Company
BTV	Bangladesh Television
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
CHT	Chittagong Hill Tracts
CNN	Cable News Network
CPB	Communist Party of Bangladesh
FCTC	Framework Convention on Tobacco Control
FDC	Film Development Corporation
HBO	Home Box Office
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICS	Islami Chhatra Shibir
ISA	Ideological State Apparatus
JI	Jamaat-e-Islami
NAM	Non-Alliance Movement
NGO	Non-government Organization
OIC	Organization of Islamic Countries
RSA	Repressive State Apparatus
SQC	Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury
UGC	University Grants Commission
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

Chapter 1

Introduction: Location of the ‘Popular’

This book is about the popularizing project¹ in Bangladesh. That is, how some specific forms of cultural products² and some discourses³ are being constructed and propagated as popular. Contested meanings of popular culture seem to be one of the leading queries during the investigation of this research. At the same time, I also looked at different polarities from which different perspectives – i.e.,

¹ The term ‘project’ is used in reference to the nuances it involves in the social scientific genre of the contemporary age. Besides the conventional usage for a planned program – in business or scientific enterprises, this also entails the deliberate set of acts and ideas that tend towards a particular objective. Often, this specific use conveys the objectives along with the programs. In this body of work, the use of the concept could be compared in parallel to the following uses:

- a) In title: “Tibi, B. 1995: Culture and Knowledge: The Politics of Islamization of Knowledge as a Postmodern Project? The Fundamentalist Claim to De-Westernization. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 12, 1.”
- b) In discussion: “....It was the westernization project and the westernizers that led to the breakup of the late Ottoman Empire; it was a westernization project and westernizers that were responsible for the exploitation of the country, its backwardness and poverty of the people as well as cultural alienation of the people from their own civilization” (Dagi 2002).

² By cultural products, I mean the relatively familiar broadcast and performed forms of artistic practices like movies, books, or advertising materials along with ideas and intellectual exercises like education curriculum or iconographic political propaganda.

³ Unlike the common reference to the conversation or utterances, discourse here is used in particular reference to its use in the contemporary social sciences and humanities. “If the analytical value of some terms derives from their descriptive precision and specificity of meaning, other words – such as discourse – owe their utility to multiple layers of meaning and their ability to stimulate ambiguity” (Barnard and Spencer 1996, 162). Within anthropology, along with some other disciplines, discourse has become a crucial concept whereas discursive analysis appeared as one of the influential methodological venture. The kind of “discourse analysis, associated with cultural studies, takes discourse more globally to refer particular areas of language use. This approach blurs together three levels of meaning: discourse is the act of talking or writing itself; it is a body of knowledge content; and it is a set of conditions and procedures that regulate how people appropriately may communicate and use that knowledge. Rather than the elemental structures of conventional interaction, this... approach to discourse pursues the connections between orders of communication, knowledge and power.” (Barnard and Spencer 1996, 162-63).

pro-people or elite – regarding forms of popular cultures could be revealed apparently. In the present multifaceted representational context of cultural products, discourses are barely dissociable from culture. Against these backdrops, my ‘research’ was grounded in various complex and contested domains of popular culture and discourses, and examined the processes of production of those. The central queries were: how the ‘popular’ is being constructed; how the organs are active in the process of construction, with a mission of ‘popularizing’; and how in turn these manifest an overriding sense of ‘national-popular’ culture. My investigation, intermingled with primary goals, sought to explore relationships among the agents – i.e., film companies, audio-visual companies, corporate financial groups, governmental agencies, educational establishments, middle-class audiences and so on – of the project and between the different social classes in regards to popular culture and discourses.

The Agents and the Issues

As a newly independent nation-state, Bangladesh has a colonial history like most of the Southern nations. The first government after the independence from Pakistan through a deadly fight in 1971, the Awami League government, opted for a gross nationalization of the industries. It included most of the industrial productions like jute, sugar, railways, electricity, and a lot more. Apart from the sectors that are defined as ‘economic’, as such, sectors of intellectual productions such as textbooks, television programs, radio programs, and extra-curriculum books were also subjected to the incorporation to a modest degree. So, the cultural production, though not solely, was a part of the governmental activities.

Since 1971, radio and television were solely state-owned until the mid-90s. Television was meant to be a single-channel broadcast only for some hours daily. In the last few years, satellite television has provided a lot more visual productions and distributions, both from the local end and from the transnational manufacturers, especially from India. Since the early 90s, satellite television has meant to be the most influential medium of entertainment, across the social classes, including the poor people in the metropolises. Along with the shift in economic policy, from what was then perceived as nationalization to what is currently being promoted as privatization, satellite television provided a huge space for the advertising industry.

Print publications in Bangladesh were always meant to be the shared area for governmental and private ventures. For the first few years after independence in 1971, only a few daily newspapers were in publication and with tight scrutiny from the government end. Secondary and higher secondary textbook boards were also under state supervision. Further, there was a research and publication

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