

Celluloid Reflections: A study of socio-political elements in Bengali New Wave Cinema

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Abstract

The present paper explores the content and technique of selective films of Bengali parallel cinema and aims to underline the way pangs and fruits of an emerging democracy were portrayed in them. It aims to critically analyze the socio political relevance of the genre in perspective to the growth of India and experiences of her people. Methodology is selective qualitative Analysis.

Keywords: New Wave Cinema, Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Aparna Sen.

Introduction

The first film by the masterly Satyajit Ray – Possibly the most unembarrassed and natural of directors – is a quiet reverie about the life of an impoverished Brahman family in a Bengali village. Beautiful, sometimes funny, and full of love, it brought a new vision of India to the screen. As India struggled to cope with the new found responsibilities of standing up as a sovereign republic with all her baggages of poverty, illiteracy and population, Pather Panchali stunned the world and pioneered a new idiom of expression in

Indian Cinema. The art, which was till then primarily an instrument of entertainment business emerged as a potent form of expression of the common man, his dreams, problems and intimate feelings. The transition was implemented primarily in Bengali language with master directors Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen adding to the movement flagged off by Ray. The Indian society experienced tremendous jolts, ups and downs as it moved shakily from an underdeveloped economy to a non aligned presence on the world map.

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Boundary issues, wars with Pakistan and China, growing population and corruption, state insurgencies. As nation's problems multiplied the Bengali films, coined as new wave, continued to thrive in aesthetics and social responsibility. The naxallite movement of the '70s was vented in Sen's Kolkata'71 while emergency was

poetically condemned in Ray's Hirak Rajar Deshe. The movement grew in stature to develop into a nationwide film movement. It established Indian cinema in the international hall of fame as a revered school of film making both in terms of content and technique.

Absorption of Cinema into India Culture

The British rule in India had a great role to play as far as confusing the Indian identity, socio-economic, cultural and moral values of Indian society was concerned. For any creative person in modern India, the need soon arose to translate this cultural mix in terms of identity. The major forces of nineteenth and early twentieth century engaged in search for, *"a new identity born of an awareness both of tradition and of modernity"*. (Dasgupta; pp17) Thus it was a uphill task for cinema to emerge into this area of national resurgence like fellow art forms painting, dance, drama and music.

In 1929, writing in reply to Sisir Kumar Bhaduri (famous actor – director of Bengali professional stage)'s brother Murari, Rabindranath Tagore made significant comments on the cinema:

Form in art changes according to the means it uses. I believe that the new art that could be expected to develop out of the motion picture has not yet made its appearance. In politics we are looking for

independence; in art we must do the same. Every art seeks to find its own independent manner of expression within the world it creates; otherwise its self expression is undermined for lack of confidence in itself. The cinema is so far acting as a slave to literature – because no creative genius has yet arrived to deliver it from its bondage. This act of rescue will not be easy, because in poetry, painting or music the means are not expensive, whereas in the cinema, one needs not only creativity, but financial capital as well. (Cited in Dasgupta; pp23)

The absorption of cinema into India culture was made difficult by the absence of an industrial-technological culture. India being an agro based country; it failed to develop a valid artistic form, a cultural contact point with tradition or reality. Except Phalke and Himanshu Rai, contact with world cinema was almost nonexistent. Cinema in British India was isolated and confined. The absence of a film culture was as marked as the physical spread of commercial formula bound cinema. In Europe and America,

discussion of film as art, film society and art theatre movements had begun in earnest in the early twenties; at the time of independence in India they had practically not been heard of. The situation was worsened by the advent of sound and star system, the latter brought about as an aftermath of the world wars. As Dileep Padgaonkar observes, "It is in this period of crisis that the industry hit upon its now famous Formulathe demands for mass entertainment witnessed a remarkable resurgence of the extravagant spectaclesRealism was eschewed." (Padgaonkar 1974; pp 28)

Post colonialism: Search for the "Parallel" cinema

Realism in India cinema dates back to the 1920s and 1930s. One of the earliest examples was V.Shantaram's 1925 silent film classic *Sawkari Pash* (Indian Shylock), about a poor peasant (portrayed by Shantaram) who loses his land to a greedy money lender and is forced to migrate to the city to become a mill worker. Acclaimed as a realistic breakthrough, its shot of a howling dog near a hut, has become a milestone in the march of Indian cinema. The 1937 Shantaram film *Duniya Na Mane* (The Unaccepted) also critiqued the treatment of women in India society. The Indian New Wave, commonly known in India as Art Cinema or Parallel Cinema as an alternative to the mainstream commercial cinema, is a specific movement in Indian Cinema, known for its serious content,

realism and naturalism, with a keen eye on the sociopolitical climate of the times. This movement is distinct from mainstream Bollywood cinema and began around the same time as the French New Wave and Japanese New Wave. The movement was initially led by Bengali cinema (which has produced internationally acclaimed filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak and others) and then gained prominence in the other film industries of India.

The new cinema for a new India : *Pather Panchali* emerges

Overwhelmed by *Bicycle Thieves*, which he saw in 1950, Satyajit Ray declared: "The Indian film maker must turn to life, to reality. *De Sica* and not *DeMille*, should be his ideal." (Ray ;1976;pp127). Even before that, in 1948–49, Ray had met and worked with Jean Renoir, in the making of the latter's film *The River* (1951). The remark of Renoir which significantly inspired and sort of helped to shape the character of Ray's work was, "When Indian cinema gives up its imitation of Hollywood and tries to express the reality around itself, it will discover a national style." (cited in Dasgupta;pg 34)

The Apu trilogy comprising *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajita* and *Apur Sansar* were set in the 1920s and they reflected:

"the liberal, individualist, cosmopolitan and modernizing vision of India's future associated most prominently with India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

The fundamental link between them was the subtler one of liberal ideology. The constraints of history, Nehru passionately believed, could be surmounted through effort and imagination; the recently liberated nation's difficulties had to be resolved by rational, moral means and the road to the future might be hard but it should always be straight. Ray, at this stage in his career, broadly shared that liberal, nationalistic vision of progress and all his early films are imbued with it.” (Sengoopta; pp 280)

Much of this probably comes not directly from Ray but from his writer Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's idealistic, meditative and spiritual quality which marginalizes evil and brings the good, the 'eternal', in human nature to the fore. In a deeply Indian sense of the world, both the novelist and the film maker are 'humanists' who believe in certain undying 'eternal' traits of human nature everywhere and in every age.

Apu, the link in the trilogy, the little boy who grows up to stand up in life all alone is a archetypal representative of a generation caught in the transition of independence in India – a young Indian, helpless and baseless fighting his way. He begins a process of self – rehabilitation by going to the city and graduating to a new kind of society. As such he is more than an individual; he is the representative of a certain class growing up into a new India. The trilogy powerfully reminded the middle class intellectual, the leading

agents of change in independent India of how the other half lives. Poverty is shown in a grim, unadorned, real manner and is indicative of the situation of a vast mass of humanity in India. The films represent the conscience of modern India.

Pather Panchali changed the way cinema was made in India. It had no influence of predecessors like P C Baruah or Himanshu Rai. It carried no baggages from European style of film making but inspiration from Italian neo realism and French new wave. But more importantly, India had got her own style of film making which Renoir had envisioned.

The pangs of partition in Ritwik Ghatak's cinema

The partition of India, more precisely Bengal, provides the context within which Ritwik Ghatak's works are situated. He never depicted partition but its victims who left the erstwhile East Pakistan to settle in West Bengal losing almost everything. He uses these characters not only to break the hegemonic interpretation of partition but also gives voice and hope to these people who are set to become defining population of the new post colonial India. Ghatak seeks to subvert the state sponsored version of history that has been foisted from above and instead tries to recover an alternative version that does not endorse the nation building project that has been reinforced by the official version of partition. It is this so called 'anti nationalism' which may be countered by

highlighting the points that he makes and by citing elements of humanism and hope ,especially in the context of rising virulent nationalist politics on both sides of the border. The view point which Ghatak shared early finds resonance in the words of Ashis Nandy:

We refuse to recognize that the birth certificates of India ,Pakistan and Bangladesh are written in blood and the memories of that first genocide constitute the dark underside of the cultures of state in South Asia.(cited in Raychaudhuri;pg 470)

In the opening sequence of Ghatak's first film *Nagarik*, the camera pans slowly depicting the river *Ganga* towards a semi industrialized and eventually an urban landscape concluding at the Howrah Bridge as the voice over pronounces, "*the great city is standing, where the river flows quietly under the harness of iron barges..... where the sky remains tightly wrapped among a jumble of chords.*" Throughout the film the characters who have all been dislocated and proletarianised by the partition, repeatedly compare their life in the city to being "*trapped in a well*".

Ghatak continually questions and undermines the myth that partition led to the creation of an Independent liberal – democratic state that recognized all its citizens equally. It is noticeable how seldom his characters refer to India or

Indianness in Ghatak's work, and inevitably, when they do so the context is deliberately vague and abstract because the characters feel no emotional attachment to either the geographical or socio-political conception of the nation state. The protagonists of Ghatak's narratives are so distanced from the project of nationhood that they are not even sure what "India" means. Ghatak's position is that "India" does not mean much to them as she was created through a process of rapture and re-birth in which they had little or no say .In *Komal Gandhar*, *Bhrigu* raises the question "Why should I leave my home ? Tell me, why should I forsake my country, my river *Padma*?" Anasuya and *Bhrigu* lament being outsiders and reflect an insecure sense of national identity.

It is useful at this point of time to analyze what Ghatak himself had to say about the effects of partition on his work:

This was the world that was shattered by the war, the famine and when the Congress and Muslim league brought disaster to the country and tore it into two to snatch for it a fragmented independence. Communal riots engulfed the country. The waters of the *Ganga* and the *Padma* flowed crimson with the blood of warring brothers. All this was part of the experience that happened around us I have not been able to break loose from this theme in all the films I have made recently. What I have found most urgent is to present to the public eye

the crumbling appearance of a divided Bengal to awaken the Bengalis to an awareness of their and a concern for their past and future. (Ghatak 2000; pg49)

This particular philosophy is reflected towards conclusions of Ghatak's works, after a wholesome stark display of bitterness and negativity about nation oozing from the pangs of partition, he most definitely discovered a ray of hope from the darkness of despair and helplessness.

Let us consider *Ramu* of *Nagarik* who chants, "...life itself will evolve out of this pain. Times are changing. We will cry no more, just grind our teeth and wait. A new dawn will come and let's all cry out together: we will not die." Similar to this in spirit, *Neeta* of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, diagnosed with Tuberculosis, grips his brother tightly and resonates through the hills, "But, I really wanted to live", followed by, "I want to live" and finally, "Tell me brother, tell me I will live." *Neeta*, *Ramu* and Ghatak's other characters are alienated from the concept and realization of nationhood by virtue of their class and geographical origin but it is this very alienation that provides the space from which they can begin to resist. *Neeta* and *Ramu*'s defiance demonstrate Ghatak's essential optimism that is apparent in spite of the heart breaking suffering that characterizes his films and thereby undermines his perception as an anti-nationalist.

Examination of state through Mrinal Sen's eyes

After *Bhuban Shome*, Mrinal Sen directed three films as part of what is now termed as the *Calcutta Trilogy- Interview*, *Calcutta -71*, and *Padatik*. *Interview* is a stylized film built around a very simple incident. A young unemployed Bengali manages to get a job interview in a mercantile firm through the help of an uncle who reminds him to wear a suit for the interview, something the man doesn't have. With great difficulty, he borrows one and takes it in for cleaning. There is a cleaner's strike but he manages to retrieve his suit. Unfortunately, as he is taking it home, he gets caught in a massive street demonstration, and in the commotion he loses the suit. He does go to the interview, but, without a suit, he doesn't get the job. Sen's film slowly but pointedly describes the colonial attitudes and norms that still exist in India and which are a major impediment to growth and development.

Calcutta - 71 is a film in a completely different vein. It is a set of different stories on poverty and exploitation, set apart by time. The link is a young man ageless and timeless, who observes quite passively, until the last episode when he himself is killed. The film begins with a family caught in their hut in the monsoon and trying to live through it with as much dignity as possible. Their reaction is passive without protest. But as the film develops, the characters' reaction to their condition changes. And, in the last episode

of the film, the young man who is the silent observer throughout reacts and is killed. *Calcutta- 71* is a jarring story, jarring because, it removes the veil of romanticism from India's poverty. Satyajit Ray's version of poverty is that it is a tragic human condition. Mrinal Sen's is a little more stark and realistic – poverty is a product of exploitation and people's inhumanity to people.

From *Calcutta – 71* to *Padatik* (The Foot – Soldier): A young extremist escapes from police custody and is directed to a shelter by the party. He questions the leadership. Though he remains loyal to the spirit of the movement, he realizes that there were many situations where the leadership could have been faulted. This re – examination of the left extremist movement is an exciting effort to make the film more controversial, especially in times when other media refuse to deal with these subjects.

Padatik created quite a stir in political circles. The right wing groups felt that undue importance and recognition was being given to an “anti – social” extremist group. Those on the left tried to ignore the film or criticize it as indicative of right reaction and revisionism. All said and done, the film stands out as an important effort at making film a forum for discussion and documentation.

For a long time after its brutal repression by the government and its paramilitary units, the extremist movement had lain

low. And during that silence, there was little restructuring of the movement's ills. *Padatik*, even if it is eventually a product of establishment capital, points out that this does not have to be. Self – criticism can help and can be very constructive. The leadership should not be placed above criticism or reproach.

After *Padatik* came *Chorus*, a political fantasy set in the future where a small group of industry heads and political leaders get together to fend off what they think is a potential revolution. The film deals with the fear that the system's leaders have of people they oppress. What Mrinal Sen is trying to say is that these leaders ,after creating a structure they can exploit and after designing their own system of survival, always fear that this structure will self – destruct and drag them down with it. Ultimately nothing really happens. But the unresolved threat continues to haunt the so- called military – industrial complex.

In an interview with Udayan Gupta in 1976, Sen had interesting opinions to share .Excerpts from the interview goes like:

UG: Your next film ,*Interview*, seems to continue in this vein and seems less of an angry political comment and more of a stylized satirical description of our Victorian morals and the colonial tradition. *But Calcutta-71* is a remarkable jump from *Bhuban Shome* and *Interview*. From satire and stylized storytelling, you suddenly move into stark realism and a very angry

depiction of India's poverty. How did you get to make *Calcutta-71* ?

MS: I made *Calcutta -71* when Calcutta was passing through a terrible time. People were getting killed every day. The most militant faction of the Communist Party – the Naxallite – had rejected all forms of parliamentary politics. At the same time they had a host of differences with the other two Communist Party factions. These, in turn, led to many interparty clashes. Invariably all of the factions ignored the main issue of mobilizing forces against the vested interests – the establishment.

This was the time when I felt I should spell out the basic ills of the country, the fundamental diseases we are suffering from and the humiliations we have been subject to. This was the time to talk of poverty – the most vital reality of our country, the basic factor in the indignity of our people. I wanted to interpret the restlessness, the turbulence of the period that is 1971 and what it is due to. I wanted to have a genesis . The anger has not suddenly fallen out of anywhere. It must have a beginning and an end. I wanted to try to find this genesis and in the process redefine our history. And in my mind this is extremely political. I found a continuing link in the film – a young man of 20, uncorrupted. He has lived this age of 20 for the last 1000 years or more. He has been passing through death and squalor and poverty . And for the past 1000 years or more he has bridged despair and

frustration. For him the history of India is a continuous history not of synthesis but of poverty and exploitation.

UG: But doesn't the nature of exploitation change with the industrial revolution?

MS : I know , so what I've focused on is not exploitation but poverty: how poverty debases human beings, disintegrates the whole pattern, the whole system. That is why I picked out five days spread out over 40 years. I took three or four stories of poverty: grinding, ruthless, unrelenting poverty, poverty that is not glamorous. We have always been trying to make poverty respectable, and dignified. This has been a tradition which has been handed down to us from generation to generation. You can find plenty of this in Bengali literature. As long as you present poverty as something dignified , the establishment will not be disturbed. The establishment will not act adversely as long as you describe poverty as something holy, something divine. What we wanted to do in *Calcutta – 71* was to define history, put it in its right perspective. We picked out the most vital aspect of our history and tried to show the physical side of hunger is the same . Over time, the physical look of hunger is the same.

But there is a marked change in the people – their perception changes. In a way I call this the dialectics of hunger, the dialectics of poverty. How people move from resignation and from callousness to cynicism and being beaten – down, and

anger and self – destruction and poverty and finally to anger and violence which can become very creative in the process. This is what we wanted to say. Then like a Greek chorus this young man appears and tries to explain the situation and how at the end hungry people become violent and the process creates something new.

UG : Your next film , *Padatik* , is probably the first overtly political film made in India. It is also probably the first time that a filmmaker has engaged in political discussion and analysis through the film medium. However, many of the politically committed felt that the registration of the political message could have been firmer, stronger. Could it have been ? Or are you happy with the first effort ?

MS: *Padatik* has something to do with the contemporary political scene. You don't have a free hand here. It is not possible for many reasons to be very candid about many things. But that doesn't mean you'll tell half – truths. Half – truths are perhaps more dangerous than lies. To my mind , I tried to analyze the political situation the way I felt it would be done. It could have been clearer but I felt that even this should be done. We had arrived at a point when the Left movement was lying low and the leftist parties were in disarray, losing perspective and isolated at a time when there was a need for unceasing self – criticism.

That is why the protagonist in *Padatik* has unshaken faith in the party, even though

he has suffered reverses due to faulty direction. Yet he does question the leadership bitterly and uncompromisingly. Nonetheless , the fact remains that in our country as elsewhere you do have the leadership and to a certain extent even the cadres go the established way in order to fight the establishment. As the party fights the establishment, it falls victim to it. The party soon adopts the very mores and manners it has fighting . This is what is happening to our party . This is why a lot of criticism is being taken up these days and there are so many factions even in the most extremist left party – in each of the Marxist variety there are a lot of factions. So any situation dealing with this is liable to be criticized and contradicted by some faction or other. But to my mind, it is important to raise these issues. It is detrimental, ruinous , and suicidal not to discuss these issues at all when you know there is something wrong somewhere , maybe in the cadres, maybe in the leadership, maybe somewhere else.(Gupta;1976)

As the naxallite movement regains strength in the shape of Maoists and states of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Chattisgarh are tagged 'disturbed', Central Government advocating measures like '*Operation Greenhunt*' and NCTC and the country virtually engaging in a physical as well as ideological civil war , Sen's works become all the more relevant . Through the 'Calcutta Trilogy' what Sen tried to point out is very essential . One , he indicates at

the root cause for this kind of violent reaction by portraying the frustration of youth ala the man of Interview; Second , he hints at the fallacies of this kind of movements for those inside the movement to take lesson from and third and most importantly he shows a ray of hope beyond this bloodshed by politically analyzing the issues . He always places humanism over any form of reactionism.

Dealing gender on screen : The cinema of Aparna Sen

Well known Bengali writer Sunil Gangopadhyay once commented about married relationships in India that although in most cases husband is dominant, sometimes when the wife does manage some success in any field of life , it “ *gives her an identity all hers , the borders of the family are disrupted. And there is a conflict*”. (Gangopadhyay; 1996) In the same context he appreciated Aparna Sen to be courageous enough to openly analyze the real dimensions of the problem. Most of Sen’s cinema deals with the contemporary problems of Indian society, and all of it are gendered. She is interested in the human – gendered aspect of relationships and how the individual reveals and changes her identity through them. Most of her films focus on the predicament of the female protagonist. What engages her intellectually is the range of human experience. In *36 Chowringhee Lane*, the loneliness of the elderly Anglo – Indian *Miss Violet Stoneham* befriending the young lovers in

need of private space; in *Parama*, the beautiful Indian housewife unaware of her unfulfilled desires until she is charmed by the roving photographer and in *Sati*, the desires of the young mute girl who finds solace in a tree- husband. The search for an unknown, unexplored, unexpressed, unfulfilled and conflicting desire is not confined to single state like the female or physical. She often uses the sexual relationship, with all its implicit taboos in the Indian socio – cultural context, as the measure by which gender relationships are weighed and usually found wanting.

There is a particular burden of responsibility in being a woman film director of conscience who has emerged from the shadows of the towering personalities of Indian parallel cinema namely, Ray, Ghatak and of course, Mrinal Sen . Aparna Sen has appreciably refused to be labeled ‘feminist’ simply because she deals gender questions on screen. There is a difference of her work with that of her predecessors traceable perhaps to the space that falls between representing gender relationships in cinema and making a gender/ political statement through the same act. (Bose 1997; pg 321) If we consider Ray’s *Charulata* and *Ghare Baire* or Mrinal Sen’s *Khandahar* what assails one is a sense of sadness, edging on doom, for the woman’s future, either arising out of her own transgressions or merely her destiny as woman. The camera of *Khandahar* shows a sad *Jamini* in the midst of ruins, resting on a pillar, in a long shot where it seems that she is both

implicit and explicit personality with the ruins. In the concluding scene of Aparna Sen's *Parama*, the house wife recovering from her attempted suicide following the revelation of a past extra marital affair gains strength from a tender sapling in a pot and decides to carry on in life.

In an interview after the release of *Sati*, Sen said of her these three films:

The loneliness of individuals seems to be a recurrent motif in all three films, i.e. the private area of individuals. *Parama* like Miss Stoneham is very lonely. After her suicide attempt, she explores the path to the final arrival at her identity all alone. Uma, the girl in *Sati*, is not only alone, but completely isolated from other people because she is mute. That's where the link may lie. There is another link, perhaps, and that's for the benefits – the 'woman' in all three films emerges with strength. (cited in Bose; 1997; pg 324)

Whither New Wave Cinema?

Writing enthusiastically about Parallel cinema, Dilip Padgaonkar commented that, " ... *it will be recalled, within parenthesis, that with the singular exceptions of Fatehlal and Damle's Sant Tukaram and the films of Satyajit Ray it was only the parallel cinema that received fulsome praise in the West. Le Monde's influential critic, Louis Macorelles, hailed it as a 'mini-revolution'*". (Padgaonkar 1974; pg 28) Although, the new wave has never been able to reach the common mass film audience of India,

there is no denying the fact that it has been successful to demarcate good cinema from bad and develop a small but sizeable audience with taste for good cinema. With globalization and the governments increasingly emphasizing on open market economy, the funding for parallel cinema from government sources have dried up. But, the ground work by new wave has today led to the evolution of a 'middle of the road' cinema which in terms of content and treatment is characteristically of the parallel cinema, but it also has the extra weapon of marketing which its predecessor distinctly lacked. The success of *Hyderabad Blues*, *Monsoon Wedding*, *My Brother Nikhil*, *Khosla ka Ghosla*, *Dev D*, *Peepli Live*, *Raincoat*, *The Last Lear*, *Chokher Bali* have definitely paved the way to bolster experimental film making. The introduction of small capacity screen in multiplexes have definitely aided the economic viability of these films. Satyajit Ray had foreseen viability conditions for the parallel cinema as:

It is significant that in the cinema of the West the veering towards unconventionalism has been exactly simultaneous with the growth of permissiveness ... Which brings us to our own country where, alas, such permissiveness is still a long way off. And yet the New Wave is being talked about and the offbeat film is on the way to becoming a reality..... art theatres will come into existence to provide an outlet for their films when the need arises. (Ray 1976; pg 90-2)

The subject and issues taken up by Bengali new wave film makers had direct influence and acted as a source of inspiration on Indian new wave film makers of later generation. Directors like Shyam Benegal, Kumar Shahni and Sayeed Mirza openly attribute their schooling to works of Ray, Sen and Ghatak respectively, and together with its honest, selfless and devoted art making the Indian new wave cinema indeed becomes a agent of national awareness and consciousness, committed to the cause of the nation. One hope that in the coming days the neo – new wave cinema of India continues to gain strength and its ideological and philosophical stand remains undeterred.

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