Uttam Kumar in his last Bengali film, Ogo Bodhu Sundari

Bengali Cinema: The Long, Hard Road To Recovery

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There is hardly any room for optimism; little to sustain a firm conviction that the Bengali cinema is well set on the road to a revival. Yet there does seem to be a sign of something 'new' on the distant horizon, some hope that Tollygunje will not become a neglected and launguishing area of B-grade pot-boilers in the absence of a film from Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen.

To be sure, tradition prevails with most of those who contribute to the annual tally of about 35 films, exploiting sloppy and overworked sentiments, mostly against rural backgrounds (since that is where the bulk of the Bengali cinema audience lies). Mrinal Sen has kept to his schedule of one film a year

although he seems to have developed a new style of completing a film and rushing with it to a festival even before the home audience has tasted it. Satyajit Ray also kept to the one-film-a-year routine till a particularly severe spell of illness sent him to a nursing home for a few days towards the end of 1980 and then restricted his movements for several months. But Ray is a determined and tireless artist. When he is not making films, he is producing his delightful variety of detective fiction, doing sketches or putting final editorial touches to a children's magazine.

Ray and Sen have continued to ensure that the world takes note of what is happening on a remote Tollygunje circuit. What is locally more interesting is the seeming emergence of a new breed. There is no sign as yet that it has made its presence felt there or had an impact on the antediluvian style in which the task of making motion pictures is accomplished in Tollygunje. But the sight of young committed artistes making out-of-the-ordinary films against enormous odds has brought a new enthusiasm. There is the impression, which may or may not last, that these young venturers, acting in concert, might still be able to invade and break, if not altogether banish, the moth-eaten system.

In 1980, the system all but collapsed for an entirely different reason—the death of Uttam Kumar. When the ageless matinee idol died of his third heart attack in harness (this writer had spoken to him at some length on the sets on his last day of shooting for *Ogo Bodhu Sundari*—a free adaptation of Shaw's *Pygmalion*), it was clear that Tollygunje would never be the same again. It hasn't been during the past year. A sense of deliberate caution prevails. The flow of capital to Calcutta's modest dream factory has slowed down. Consequently, so has production. At the box-office, the hits have comprised many of Uttam's last few assignments—both in Calcutta and Bombay. Even technically imperfect films, like *Ogo Bodhu Sundari* and *Dooriyan,* in which he could not complete his work, have sailed through to unprecedented success.

To understand the economics of the Bengali cinema and the method of its functioning, one must turn inevitably to Uttam Kumar's contribution during 25 years of unchallenged reign. He was the rock on which Tollygunje stood, its most dependable walking stick. While Ray and Sen brought back trophies from abroad, it was Uttam who made sure that the investment climate did not stagnate in spite of the ever-widening influence of the Hindi extravaganza. In local terms, he constituted a one-man industry. All investment and box-office calculations revolved around whether Uttam appeared in a particular film. To investors, he represented an assured commercial viability. He was the light of hope in the darkest days of the commercial Bengali cinema.

All this is not to exude enthusiasm for most of Uttam Kumar's 200-odd films. In retrospect, it looks like one big personal tragedy that an actor of such talent was tied to a limited range of performances and to a particular set of mannerisms; that most of what he did was less connected with the aesthetics of acting than the compelling need to satisfy millions of fans; and that he only began attaching some importance to intelligent endeavours after appearing in Ray's *Nayak* (1966). But the more significant point to be noted at the moment is that film-making in Tollygunje in the future is likely to be less of a star-oriented and more of a collective enterprise—with a balanced emphasis on cast and subject. That may not be a bad thing after all!

Satyajit Ray explaining a scene in Joi Baba Felunath *to Siddhartha Chatterjee, Santosh Dutta and Soumitra Chatterjee.*

Judging by the run of Bengali films during the past year, it does seem, however, that Tollygunje will take some time to settle down to the old style of stressing strong narratives and powerful performances. During the thirties, forties and fifties—when Bengali films were a thriving trade—film-makers seemed able to fathom the expectations of the audience. Their works were professionally competent, if seldom thought-provoking. Contemporary literature, mainly the stories of Saratchandra, was an unfailing source. Screenplay writers accomplished the task of adapting literary material so successfully that celluloid interpretations often became more popular than the original work. About 60 films on Saratchandra stories, from 'silent' era productions to those now in the making, have encompassed almost the entire range of the novelist's work. Some stories have been filmed as many as four times. Tagore has been slightly more difficult to handle for the simple reason that all his stories cannot be put into the conventional, saleable format. Tarashankar is closer to the universal appeal which Sarat's fiction had and, consequently, was more frequently handled. Bankimchandra's more important works had an epic quality which few film-makers were competent or brave enough to explore well.

Whatever the comparative utility of these masters, it was an established fact that the Bengali cinema had a literary bias. The situation did not change when Satyajit Ray arrived on the scene. While several organisations last year were busy celebrating the silver jubilee of his emergence as a film-maker, Ray himself reminded his admirers that his 'arrival' was as much on account of the inspiration he derived from Bibhutibhushan Banerjee's unforgettable novel as his

own cinematic consciousness. And from *Pather Panchali* in 1955 to *Hirak Rajar Deshey* in 1981, it has been a long association with distinguished literature—whether the classics of Tagore and Tarashankar, the contemporary fiction of Sankar and Sunil Gangopadhyaya, a fantasy by Ray's own grandfather or his own detective fiction. If film-making was to have any meaning in the local context, it had to have narrative bias —as experimentalists like Mrinal Sen discovered to their cost.

But it is not so much the experimentalists as the general run of film-makers who have strangely neglected the narrative aspect. The basic character of the audience has not changed since the good old days of New Theatres and the early talkies; a well-structured, old-fashioned, sentimental tale is still the principal diet. Where the present output of films is shockingly deficient is in the adaptation of literary material. Most of the professional screenplay writers, but for whom many successful directors would have gone out of circulation, are dead. A director, especially a raw one, today insists on writing his own story and screenplay, with the result that none of these functions receives the concentration it deserves. In the make-shift and make-do pattern of work, it is often not surprising to find a film-maker organising finance and finalising the cast before sitting down to flesh out, in ragged fashion, the bare outline of a hackneyed plot.

Some of the problems concerning the narrative may be directly related, however, to the quality and style of contemporary Bengali fiction. Gone are the days when simple sentiments were as necessary in the pages of a book as on the screen. Modern fiction writers have preferred to juggle with form rather than develop content. It has also tended to have an urban bias whereas the Bengali cinema is rooted in rural sentiments. The result is that modern fiction has become a far less dependable source.

Perhaps the biggest tragedy is the decline and even disappearance of middle-ranking film-makers. Even during what came to be known as the 'golden age' of the thirties, outstanding film art was not consistent in quality. But there was a basic assurance in the handling of cast and story. And the total production values compelled attention. It resembled the old Hollywood without the remarkable technological progress that had already been made there.

In the 50 years which have passed since the 'talking' cinema arrived, it is surprising that the Bengali audience has remained emotionally anchored in the style and content of films of the thirties. Tastes of the Hindi-speaking audience have changed almost beyond recognition since Ardeshir Irani's *Alam Ara* brought the revolution of sound to India. But the Bengali audience is still inspired by the ideas which created *Chandidas, Mukti, Bhagyachakra* and *Devdas.*

If most of the stalwarts of the thirties were active today, they would perhaps be considered, in terms of contemporary film styles, a shade better than middle-rankers. Within their limitations, they were involved in exploring the possibilities of the medium while ensuring that the audience got its entertainment. Modern intellectuals might frown on a surfeit of sentiment, and yet Barua, Nitin Bose and Devaki Bose were steadily introducing techniques like dramatic editing, background music for emotional effect and visual imagery. Today cinema—and, in most cases, also entertainment—has stagnated. The middle-rankers, who ought to be closely associated with the development of the cinema as an art as well as an industry, have lapsed into a pretty long spell of dismal form.

To be fair, it must be noted that the working conditions in Tollygunje have become infinitely worse. Power and budget curbs have played havoc with schedules as well as technical quality. Studio floors, much fewer now than 25 years ago, are in a pitiable state of disrepair. Cameras are scarce; sound and dubbing mechanisms have degenerated to a state where many complain that even promising ventures are killed in the laboratories. But all this is no excuse for the fact that three out of four Bengali films made today are conceptually and structurally weak, launched not because their makers are professionally competent to do so but because each has found a casual financier ready to stretch out a faltering hand.

The infrastructural and artistic crisis has persisted, with the Bengali cinema finding no way of solving its own problems. The representative trade body, the Eastern India Motion Pictures Association, representing the production, distribution and exhibition sectors, has been too busy trying to resolve conflicting interests—with privileged, big exhibitors invariably gaining the upper hand. Subsequently it has become a long and now bitter tale of unfulfilled Government promises to put Tollygunje back on its feet and to help revive a glorious tradition.

As long as the efforts to transfer cinema to the Concurrent List of the Indian Constitution and bring it under the control of a national policy do not take legal shape, the State Governments must inevitably be concerned with the development of the regional cinemas. The tragedy in West Bengal is that successive Governments have paid only lip service to the needs of progress in the sphere of the cinema. Inquiry and film development committees have been constituted; stray loans or grants disbursed; assignments given for documentaries and newsreels; a studio rescued from permanent closure; independent films taken up for total sponsorship; even the formality of awards gone through. But all this has not added up to, or become part of, a consistent and well-conceived film policy. Where several other State Governments have successfully implemented policy decisions (other than compulsory screening of local films) to protect the interests of the regional cinema, successive Ministries in West Bengal have relied mostly on ad hoc decisions and gimmicks. These invariably are matters of personal or political preference and, invariably too, become matters of inter-departmental bickering.

One recent example of such ad hoc measures: After years of refusal to grant tax exemptions to quality and even award-winning films to help them reach a wider audience, the Finance Ministry (of the State) woke up to the realisation that the problems of the Bengali cinema could be solved at one stroke if all the houses offered only one-rupee tickets for all categories of seats. There was some comfort drawn from the fact that everything from unmitigated trash to Satyajit Ray's *Hirak Rajar Deshey* sold extremely well. It didn't take long for the Ministry to discover that the scheme was, in most cases, not an economically viable proposition both for the film industry as well as the State Government. It was withdrawn as hastily as it was introduced.

Come to think of it, these ad hoc measures and gimmicks were being indulged in while Tollygunje was pinning its hopes on much-trumpeted schemes for a colour laboratory-cum-sound and dubbing theatre to bring the Bengali cinema in line with modern technological achievements; an art film theatre-cum-archive and library for discerning students of the cinema; liberalisation of the rules for

theatre construction to augment outlets for regional films; aid to the four running studios to replace outdated and dilapidated equipment; and a steady flow of grants to help maintain production at a reasonable rate and bring new and potential talent to the surface. But what can one say of many such schemes which have been doomed to gather dust over the years while Ministries have changed hands and previous decisions inevitably, and equally purposelessly, been subject to 'reviews' and 'revisions'?

It is perhaps one of the inherent wonders of the medium that all this apathy and frustration have not stifled activity on the film front. Even if the climate is not exactly prosperous or buoyant, there is no real threat of an imminent collapse. Tollygunje has survived years of governmental indifference. And there is no reason why it shouldn't recover from Uttam Kumar's sudden death fairly soon. The old heroes and heroines—Suchitra Sen, Madhabi Mukherjee, Vasant Chowdhury, Anil Chatterjee and, to some extent, even Soumitra Chatterjee—have retired to the background. There are encouraging signs that a younger crop consisting of Dipankar Dey, Tapash Paul, Mahua Roy Chowdhury and Debashree Roy will sway the hearts of film-goers in the years to come.

Already, a brilliant run of box-office successes has prepared the ground for a new mood of infectious enthusiasm. More films prospered in 1980 than at any time during the last five years. At the top of the list were films of the old stalwarts—Ray, Sen, Tapan Sinha and Tarun Majumdar. Ray's *Hirak Rajar Deshey,* produced by the West Bengal Government and helped by the one-rupee scheme, had an impressive run at three Calcutta theatres although, in terms

Tapash Paul and Mahua Roy Chowdhary in Tarun Mazumdar's Dadar Kirti

of both art and commerce, it was several rungs below *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne,* of which it was a sequel. Tapan Sinha is an old favourite of the established producers. His long list of films from the mid-fifties has consistently brought rich dividends although they have avoided conventional plots and stock sentiments. His last film, *Banchharamer Bagan,* a random adaptation of absurd theatre, had a well-patronised golden jubilee run. Sinha's successful blending of aesthetic and box-office elements has only been equalled by Tarun Majumdar. His *Dadar Kirti* was reminiscent of the delightful exuberance of *Balika Bodhu,* not nearly as charming but certainly as powerful a box-office draw.

Mrinal Sen's record makes a more intriguing study. Time was when he made shabby pot-boilers. Then came the volte-face to social commitment and a virtual disowning of his past. Producers fled, but Sen scraped and borrowed (from every conceivable source) to continue making one film a year, most of which left home audiences cold. Finally came the foreign recognition and the growing popularity on the festival circuit leading to the Retrospectives at the last London and Delhi film festivals on his completion of 25 years since the making of the easily forgettable *Raat Bhor.* But foreign recognition is apparently a factor to reckon with. In 1980, *Ekdin Pratidin* did reasonably well in Calcutta (following a period of hibernation) after it was received well at Cannes. This year, *Akaler Sandhane* came to Calcutta for its commercial release via the Delhi and Berlin circuits with the additional comfort of having bagged the Silver Bear. The crowning success was the Golden Lotus and the Direction and Screenplay Awards it won in

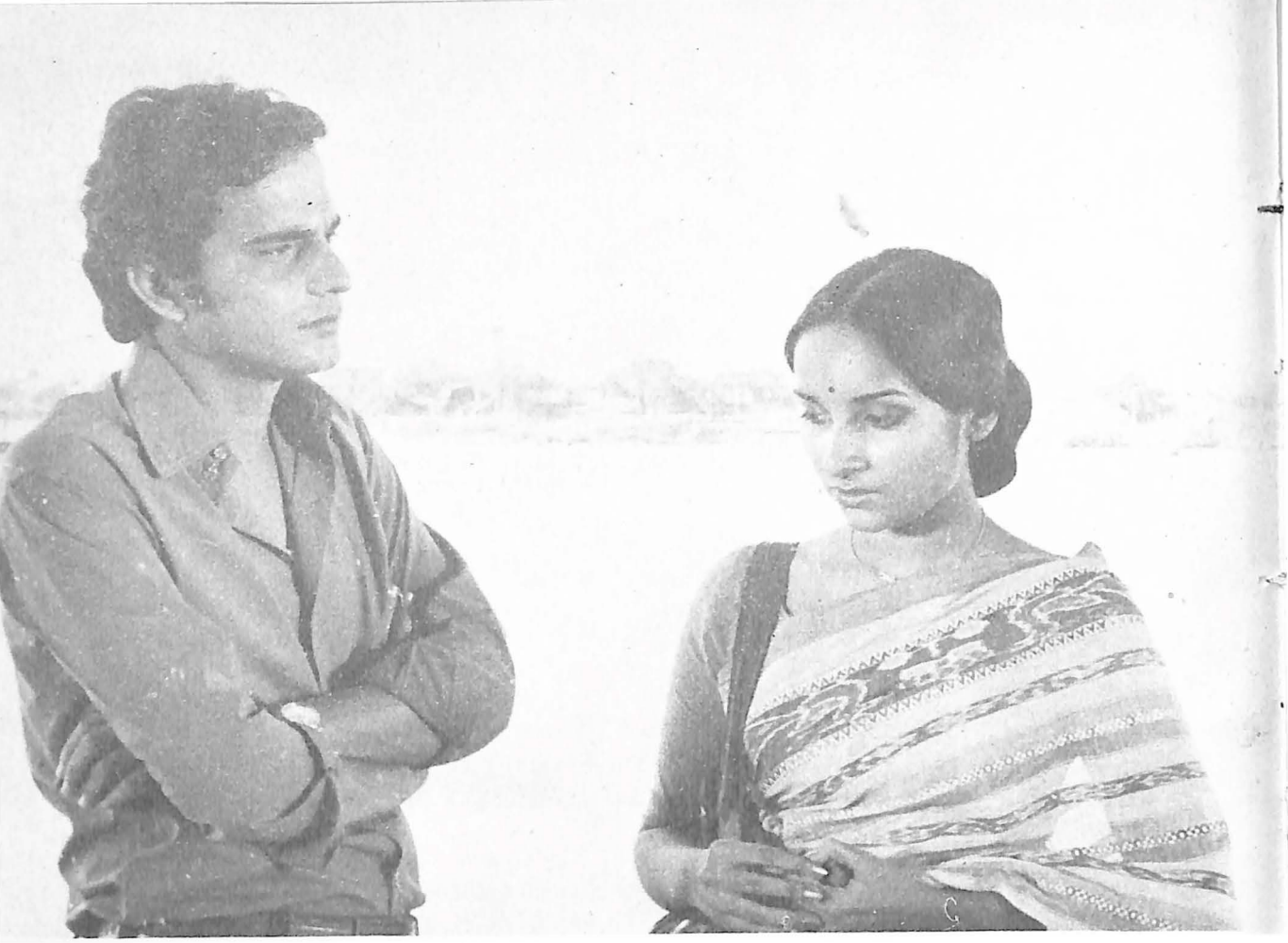
Mrinal Sen briefing Smita Patil for a scene in Akaler Sandhane

Gautam Ghosh - young hopeful.

this year's National Film Festival. But the most interesting thing to note about Sen at the moment is that his films are beginning to sell well abroad while producers (from Shashi Kapoor to Dhiresh Chakravorty) are queuing up at home.

But the real cause for hope does not lie so much in these successes as in the emergence of a young group determined, and almost desperate, to break new ground. Their unconventional methods of work—mostly outside the studio, in a packed start-to-finish schedule, in 16mm colour to be later blown up to 35mm for commercial exhibition and with non-professional casts—have become the source of what might turn out to be an excitingly new and intelligent 'young cinema'. It might be too early to talk about some of the young experimentalists like Utpalendu Chakravorty (who won this year's newly introduced "Best First Film" Award for *Maina Tadanta*), Saikat Bhattacharya and Gautam Ghosh although each of them has made at least one film, feature or documentary, that is worth noting.

Nor is there any sign of a planned and purposeful movement. But it suddenly appears that we are in for a good number of good films. The brightest hope is Buddhadeb Dasgupta, a 35-year-old lecturer and poet turned filmmaker, who has already won high acclaim at home and abroad for two outstandingly conceived films—*Dooratwa* and *Neem Annapurna*. Biplab Roy Chowdhury has demonstrated almost as much control over the medium along with a subtle sense of social investigation. He is at work on two films based on stories by Sunil Gangopadhyaya and Mahasweta Devi. Purnendu Pattrea and



Pradip Mukherjee and Mamata Shankar in Buddhadeb Dasgupta's Dooratwa, *National Award winner.*

Nitish Mukherjee, two original commercial artistes, have struggled to evolve their own evocative visual styles. And there is a recent recruit to the hard-trying, committed group in Sankar Bhattacharya.

Whether these efforts gather momentum enough to change the quality of the average film and the taste of the average audience is a question that will be decided in the next two or three years. The point to note is that this group has come together not through a catalytic force but the shared concern for the future of the Bengali cinema. At this point of time, it does seem a future worth waiting for.