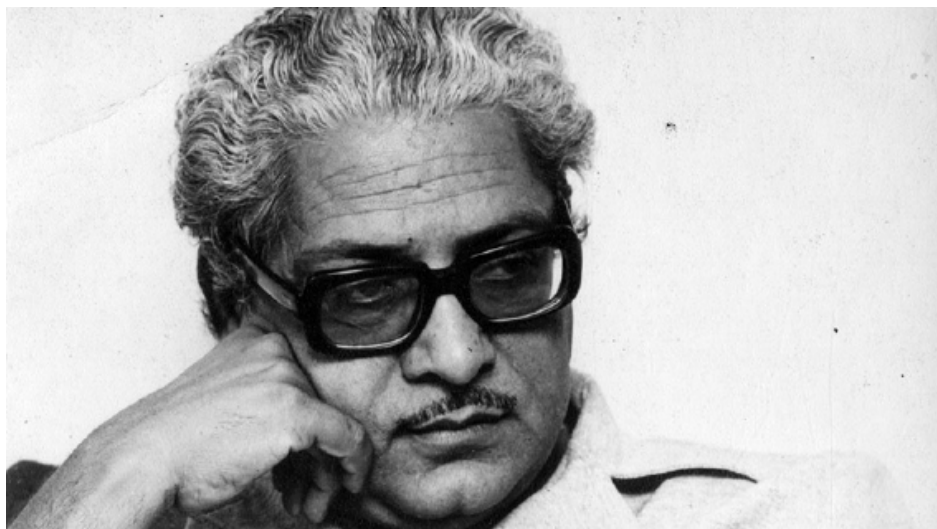


Article

Rwita Dutta

Memorabilia City and Romance: Rendezvous with Basu Chatterji Films



Basu-Chatterjee

Cinephiles of India as well as outside India often talk about a generic term ‘feel good’ films. Vast majority of people still flock to cinema halls largely with a desire to be entertained, if it comes with a social message, it earns a brownie point. Barring a niche audience, film historians, film critics, the *vox populi* craves for instant gratification from films. They despise the brain churning, convoluted themes in their daily dose of leisure. Sharmistha Gooptu in her well researched publication ‘Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation’ dwelled on the quintessential ‘bengaliness’¹ of pre/post independent Bengali cinema and its various mechanisms and manifestations. This feel good factor was a key factor in the nation building process, especially after long fraught freedom struggle and a massacre in the form of partition. Post Independent Bengali cinema acted as a cultural product to create a mark of their own. The shift had already happened in terms of Delhi’s emergence as a power centre and Bombay’s construction as a main film hub of India, Calcutta and Bengalis had to find their own strategy for survival. Uttam Kumar as a social phenomenon

happened to this plethora of Bengali *bhadrolak* middle class and saved the pride of the erstwhile culture capital of India.

One of the reasons for the eventual downfall of ‘New Theatres’ is the mass exodus of talents from Bengali cinema to the burgeoning Bombay film industry. ‘Nitin Bose left for Bombay in 1941, taking along his core group, supposedly after a falling out with his employer, and New Theatre’ decline in the period thereafter is often attributed to this exodus.’² Since then, steadfastly, Bombay Cinema had incorporated a spate of talents, not only directors but musicians, script writers, singers, actors et al. What was Bengal’s loss was proved to be a boon for the pan Indian audience. A detour of Bombay film industry during the early decades of post independent India reveals the ever presence of Bengali stalwarts.

Bimal Roy, a product of New Theatres directed the much celebrated *Udayar Pathay* (1944) to be remade in Hindi *Hamrahi* (1945). He also shifted his base to Bombay, carrying with him an array of major

talents like Hrisikesh Mukherjee, Nabendu Ghosh, Asit Sen, Kamal Bose and Salil Chowdhury, thereby, furthermore influencing a generation of filmmakers with their own distinctive style of film making. All of them carried with them the Bengali middle class flavor and disseminated it throughout India. This was the time when Indian middle class with their colonial indoctrination emerged as a monolithic entity with



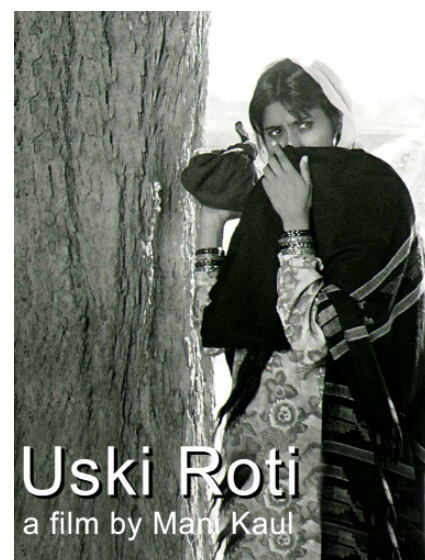
Sara Akash

a desperate urge to create their own niche. And they stumbled upon Basu Chatterjee. An ardent follower of Hrisikesh Mukherjee and an assistant to Basu Bhattacharya, Basu Chatterji was born in Rajasthan.

The influx of Bengali artists mentioned at the outset was also well timed and the bengaliness had been used by the industry as ‘they served as the resource for a major thrust towards product differentiation and market segmentation.’³

Sara Aakash (The Whole Sky, 1969) is his a commendable debut, and also is a marker of progressive realist cinema with no grandeur, usage of non actors etc. A part of New Indian Cinema, Film Finance Corporation produced this film besides Mani Kaul’s *Uski Roti* (A Day’s Bread, 1969). Time was ripe for this kind of ‘low budget, straightforward, coherent, mildly thought provoking cinema.’⁴ His much celebrated *Sara Akash* is a fresh departure from the mainstream overtly melodramatic genre. Like his contemporar-

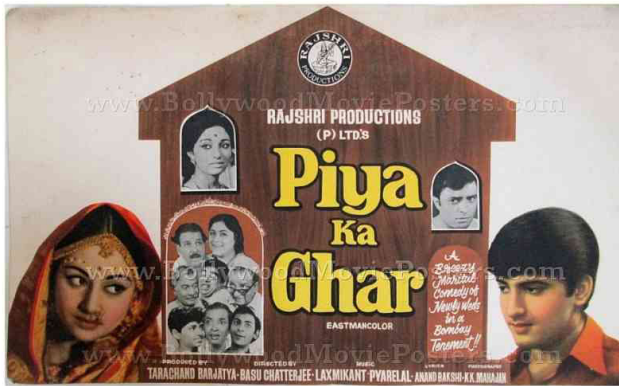
ies belonging to the new wave cinema, Chatterji was also heavily influenced by the neo realist wave blowing worldwide. *Sara Akash* is a firm commentary on marriage as a social institution standing in the verge of ‘mistaken modernity’ India encountered in the post independence days. The film focuses on Samar (Rakesh Pandey), a college going, educated soul with liberal values, and lofty ideas who couldn’t accept the idea of forceful arranged marriage on him. His wife, educated by the then standard, is victimized due to the disapproval of her husband. Her education makes her victim to all the taunts of her in laws. Arranged marriage, a system so imbibed into the feudal patriarchal system of Indian society that any aberration to it is considered to create an inevitable conflictual situation in the feudal joint family structure. The film has a narrative, but not the way the Indian audience is accustomed to, mostly presented with enormous wit, banter and satire, the film follows almost every rule of the book. Besides the journey of the film towards the conflict resolution situation between the couple till the end, it also examines obliquely the plight of



Uski Roti

educated women and what domesticity churns out of her. Her state of well being is conditioned by the attitude of her husband and other family members. She is nonexistent. But the indictment towards such patriarchal tendencies is conspicuous by its absence in his films. Possibly it is this conspired detachment to this ethnographical community is intended upon. In the

seminal book 'Ideology of the Hindi Film', Madhava Prasad contends that in this film 'the urban middle class world is treated with a solicitous detachment that was to disappear with the further development of the middle class cinema'.⁵



Piya ka Ghar

Surprisingly, Chatterji took a sharp turn after his formidable entrée in the realm of cinema. With private sponsorship, he delves deeper into what he is much remembered for: his own 'middle class' cinema, his auteurship, which is much more palatable, market friendly, his palate became much accessible, not as stark as *Sara Akash*. His forte was light comedy, mostly catering to the urban cine going masses. His oeuvre highlighted everyday life of the common people of the city who remains mostly absent in the grand melodramatic mainstream Hindi Cinema. The nook and corner of Bombay came alive in his films. Like a master craftsman and narrator, Chatterji chronicled the maximum city⁶ and its nuances.

His *Piya ka Ghar* (The House of My Beloved, 1972) is an extension of the same discourse started off with *Sara Aakash*. In the urban milieu, the denizens of a newly independent nation, standing at the cross roads of feudal familial mores and anticipations of modernity, marriage or coupledness becomes the site of confrontation. During this nation building process, individual demands and needs are to be articulated, sorted and accommodated. Marriage is the familiar trope within which these reconfigurations happen. An inevitable quest for privacy of nuclear couples is becoming definitive. Moinak Biswas in his archival essay 'The Couple and Their Spaces: *Harano Sur* as Melo-

drama Now'⁷ envisages that 'From the familial to the conjugal space is a journey that is completed in Hollywood films but remains largely unfulfilled in Indian Popular Cinema'.⁷ Exemplifying *Harano Sur* (1957) he further talked about the 'allegories of Space'⁸ and altogether creation of a separate space, between the home and the outer world, where the reconciliation of the couple is articulated: 'the desire for the private'⁹ is achieved. In Chatterji's films, city provides that privacy. The influx of Bengali artists mentioned at the outset was also well timed and the bengalines had been used by the industry as 'they served as the resource for a major thrust towards product differentiation and market segmentation'.¹⁰



Harano Sur

In *Piya Ka Ghar* the couple in an urban lower middle class chawl searches for their identity as a couple. The city comes alive with its own complexities. The film warns about the big city and its challenges, especially for a couple who have probably taken the long staggering and 'ambiguous journey to the city'¹¹ in search of freedom, anonymity and a sense of equality. For a couple still encapsulated by traditional modalities city tunes out to be an alienated savage topography. Though in *Rajanigandha* (Tuberoses, 1974) the woman in Basu Chatterji's films seems to come a long way. She appears to be much more independent minded, autonomous and assertive. Deepa (Vidya Sinha) with her heightened agency of self determination,



Rajnigandha

wits a job in a teaching post before setting into matrimony, so far an indispensable part of Malti and Sarita's life, even her indecisive transgressions is at times seems quite radical. Deepa, though more progressive than her earlier counterparts, with a mind of her own, is quite apolitical in nature who refutes her college beau Navin's attachment for active politics. Her reunion with Navin after a long period of time in Bombay where she goes for an interview creates moral anxiety as well as hidden forbidden desires in her. Torn between the intricate middle class dilemma of a *bhadra-mohila* (gentle woman) she is tempted by the opulence of the ad world where once rebellious student leader Navin belongs, an inevitable earthly temptations a bourgeoisie city can offer! But even in mid 70's the middle class in Indian cinema and also as citizens of the largest democracy hinged at the middle, its woman wanted security not a quirky adventurous escapades. Upon her return to Delhi, when she revives the news of her job from an emotionless Navin over telephone, Sanjoy's appearance with the tuberose resolves her doubts, and she immediately denounces her job prospect and decides on settling with Sanjoy in Delhi. It seems that getting a job is not a priority of her life, it was not a mean for searching her self identity, what was a necessity for Aarati in *Mahanagar* (The Big City by Satyajit Ray, 1963) or a recluse for Neeta in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Cloud Clapped Stars by Ritwik Ghatak, 1960), for Deepa the job is not a mean for establishing her identity rather it is a way to have a more economically comfortable life as the middle class have always the desire to have an upwardly mobile life. The film does hint upon middle

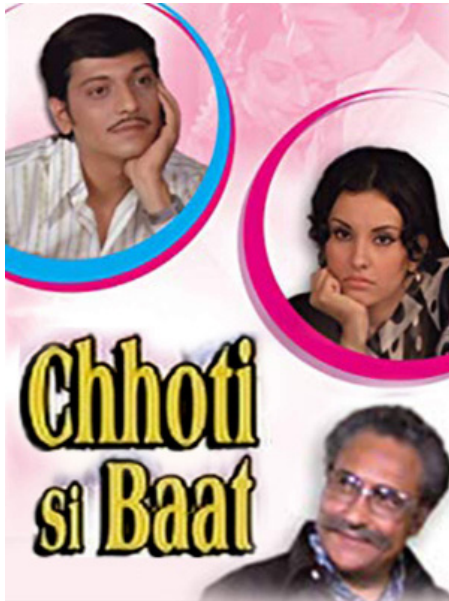
class woman's dilemma, the imminent danger lurking behind an extravagant and tempestuous industrial capitalist city, yet the metaphor of recurrent usage of tuberose as a gentle aesthetic eradicated the immediate crisis of the protagonist's wish for bourgeois female subjectivity of its moral and sexual transgressions. Urban sensibilities are disruptive yet necessary for a modern couple, especially for a woman for creating 'a powerful intervention of feminist consciousness'.¹² Chatterji's films created a kind of vociferous woman but in a milder way, consumable for the burgeoning urban middle class cine goers. They must not feel threatened by the 'avenging women'¹³ emerged as a separate but distinctive genre later period of Indian film history.



Mahanagar

Basu Chatterji's significant films hover around Bombay. City becomes an autonomous character in most of his auteristic films. City in Chatterji's films is idyllic, hopeful and full of symphonies. Unlike the present day dystopian Mumbai, Chatterji's Bombay rendered the everyday reality of urban life and the melody within. His archetypal imaginary of the

city retrieved an affectionate rush of nostalgia among the new generation. It is this inherent nostalgia of ur-



Chhoti si Baat

banism that constituted the ideas and ideals of Bombay for us. Using his films as a lens to explore and interpret the city, the dreams and aspirations of the middle class lives, provides us with a visual and sensory experience. In exploring the urban settings in *Rajanigandha* (1974), *Choti si Baat* (1976) and even in *Manzil* (1979), impeccable stories of intrigue, comedy and romance, all neatly woven together, enthralls its audience. His subjects in and around the city are enviously staggering in number and contents. He showers us with a city drenched in romance, a tiny tweaks here and there was eventually engulfed by exhilarating sense of romance and humor from the very mundane life they inhabit. Be it the jubilant bus ride in *Choti si Baat* (1976) or delightful train journey in *Baaton Baaton Mein* (1979) or the music in the rains in *Manzil*, all of his characters and the spatial, temporal intricacies they entail create quite effervescent cinematic universe, not only his characters but also its audience found solace into. A cosmopolitan city like Bombay with its heterogeneous communities shown in his city films stand in sharp contrast from the homogenizing tendency of today's politics. He found his protagonist in Amol Palekar and his woman in Vidya Sinha. The very ordinariness in their looks and gesticulations enamored them with numerous possibilities to be a part of everyday humbling nature

of the genteel Indian middle class. The office spaces, art galleries, quaint cafes, the rain drenched Bombay



Baato Baato Me

skyline, old colonial buildings, masquerading of fiat cars created quite a distinct cinematic universe so familiar to its spectators and a remote dream now. The pathological attachment to this long lost time and the haunting despair to relive that dainty yet desired life amidst the cacophonous dystopian cityscape of today's Mumbai is perhaps the lone contribution of this Bengali storyteller.

References

1. Gooptu, Sarmistha. *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation*, New Delhi, Roli Books, 2010.
2. Ibid
3. Prasad, Madhav. *Ideology of Hindi Film: A historical Construction*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
4. Vasudev, Aruna. *New Indian Cinema*, New Delhi, Macmillan, 1986.
5. Prasad, Madhav. *Ideology of Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
6. Mehta, Suketu. *Maximum City-Bombay, Lost and Found*, New Delhi, Penguin India, 2004.
7. Biswas, Moinak. *The Couple and Their Spaces: Harano Sur as Melodrama Now* in Ravi S. Vasudevan, *Making Meaning of Hindi Cinema*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2000.
8. Ibid
9. Ibid

10. Prasad, Madhav, Ideology of Hindi Film: A Historical Construction. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
11. Nandy, Asish: An Ambiguous Journey to the City. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
12. Pillai, Meena. Ed: Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalising Gender Hierarchies, Orient Black Swan, 2010.
13. Gopalan, Lalitha. Avenging Women in Indian Cinema in Ravi S. Vasudevan, Making Meaning of Hindi Cinema, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2000.

Ms. Rwita (Rita) Dutta is a Member of FIPRESCI-India.