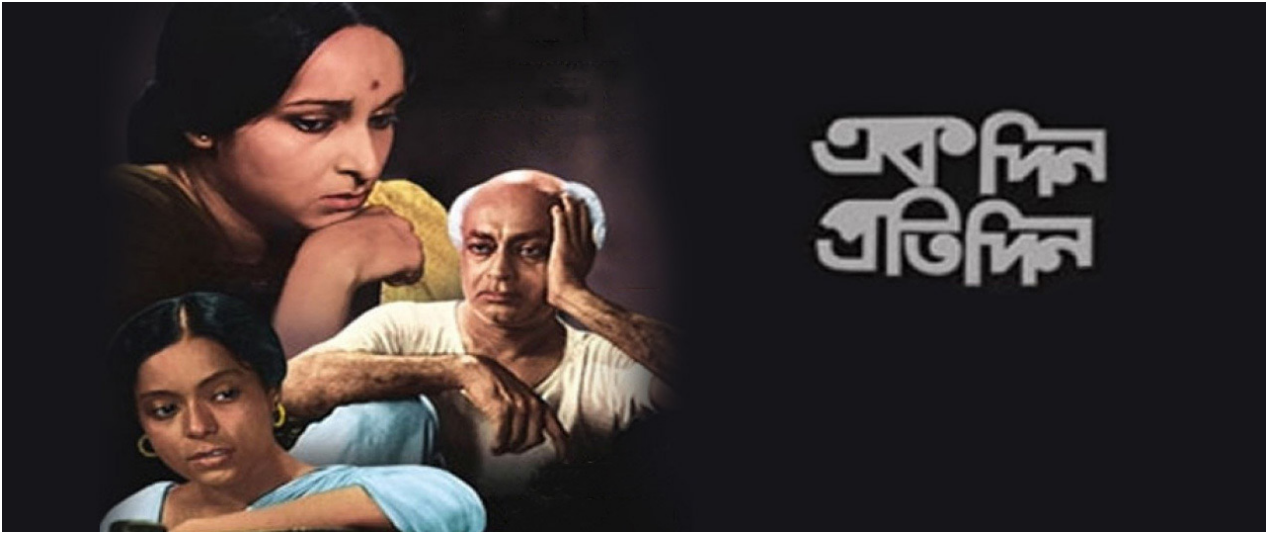


Article

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The Subject of Bengali Cinema

When photography was invented though it did elicit sufficient enthusiasm from the mass a large section of people refused to recognize it as any form of ‘art’. Their logic was simple to understand though. It was – since a camera with the help of lenses film etc. simply reproduces the world as it is how can photography be an art. Gradually of course the perceptions changed. Similar criticism or stigma did attach to cinema in its earlier days. Though cinema uses storytelling, dance music acting etc. why it should be called an art form by itself? It is only recording the acting songs etc. and only adding to portability to these. And definitely adding portability cannot be considered as art.

Gradually however with works of stalwarts like Griffith Eisenstein and Chaplin a grammar of cinema emerged. Needless there were many other contributors to the development of cinematic language as is natural for any emerging art form. Probably the first discovery that clearly separated cinema from theatre or stage performances is that of ‘close up’ and ‘big close up’ later on. Outdoor shooting which makes another big difference came lat-

er as till that time all shooting was done indoor with pointed sets, which seem quite hilarious when viewed today. The development of Film language progressed in a two-pronged manner. On one hand there was development of various techniques evolved mostly by brilliant directors and cinematographers and on the other technological advancements made by scientists. It is quite natural to expect that this evolution will be a continuous ongoing process.

Sir Charles Darwin shook the world with the publication of his monumental work on evolution “The Origin of Species”. Only two other men who have shaken the world like this are Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx. If there was a Darwin or Marx foreseeing the future of Bengali Cinema in the same line of evolution, I am sure he would have horribly failed. I say this because in Bengali Cinema (and to a great extent in Indian cinema as a whole) this evolution of language has stopped. In fact, probably I have already asked for too much. Darwin put forward the theory that those organs which are frequently used get developed

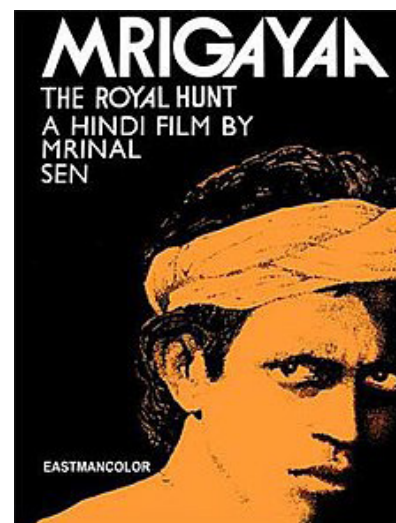
while those not used become vestigial. With long nonuse of cinematic language, the factor has become almost extinct from cinema. So, there is no point in talking of evolution of something that is facing extinction.



The other prong of this evolution that is advent of better cameras lights software etc. is going ahead of course. So, what we land up with is almost going back to square one when film consisted of stage performances (read studio performances) shot in camera and crudely edited end product. The only difference is with the advent of better technology the pictures are not grainy or the sound is digital. In fact, an aspect of technology called special effects is greatly helping directors with serious deficits in grey cells to cover up their lacuna. This is software driven technology of so called 'special effects. Definitely it creates fantastic sound and visual effects that mesmerize the senses of audience. If artistic brilliance could be construed as directly proportional to the degree of so-called astonishment, then there would have been nothing to lament for. Unfortunately, it is not. The result; Business as usual sometimes high and sometimes low, but almost complete disappearance of Bengali Cinema from the international arena.

Ray once made a comment that 'Cinema is highest form of commercial art'. Of course, it is true so is the case for any art form. An author writing a story has to depend on the editor and the editor has to depend on the likes and the dislikes of his readers. But in Cinema

it is more so because the involvement of money is astronomical compared to that made by the author and the editor. Many a director put forward this logic of 'public acceptance' and slides down the comfortable shaft of public demand'. The shaft is greased with lucre of course. They comfortably ignore that public demand is nothing cast in stone and given an opportunity the taste and demand of the public can change. Though Bimal Roy and Nimai Ghosh did exceptional works before him the credit of making the audience 'adult' definitely bestows on Ray who did it almost single-handedly.



I would like to focus on another big deficiency in modern films. If you see the milieu you will see find that all films or almost all are made on urban lives. Not only that the stories revolve men and women of a particular affluent class. Majority of the people of my country who live in villages are not relevant so are not relevant the struggling daily bread earners or men in blue collared jobs. Definitely one reason behind this total shift to urban affluent milieu is mass closure of single screen cinema theatres across Bengal. But that is not the whole reason. Also, if observed it will be found there is almost no film that addresses any social concern of seriousness. Political films are absent totally and the only reflection of present times is in the gadgets used by the actors. And of course, there is a big thrust in so called mystery and thriller films centered on the same class as mentioned above. In other words, the film makers seem to insulate themselves and the audience from the objective reality of the day. It needs to be understood that addressing

objective reality does not mean sentimentalizing some issues and making some tear jerkers as some makers are doing. Addressing needs to be smart and dialectical.

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THE OUTSIDERS / LES MARGINAUX



Ray's *Mahanagar* showed us the tragedy of private banks and the taboo associated with woman going to work. *Jana Aranya* and *Seemabaddha* focused from different angles of course, on the burning issues of political unrest, joblessness, and decadence of values. Ritwick made us feel the pain of partition. Sen's *Ekdin Pratidin* and *Kharij* bring up many glaring questions. But no more, all these are history. These are classics, 'always to be spoken high about but never to be read and followed'.

We have all read the harrowing accounts of the migratory workers who had to walk thousands of miles in an effort, many a time futile, to reach their home. I will be extremely surprised if I hear of any film maker working and planning a film on this subject.

Apparently these two problems of forgetting film language and living in a safe insulated zone are not related. In reality they are highly

related. It requires grip on the subject of cinema to move out of the comfortable zone and address issues of mass interest working in a locale not that familiar to the director. With that mastery almost fully, city bred Sen can make *Mrigaya* and *Oka Uri Katha* or Ray can make *Pather Panchali*.

If film is subject to hegemony by one or two houses and independent movies are not supported alike by the government and audience, the cart will go downhill faster and faster. Once upon a time there was an organization called West Bengal Film Development Corporation. It is closed for many years now. These sorts of organizations need to be reopened. Effort from authorities is highly needed to save the single screen theatres spread across the state. And above all new talents need to be brought into the arena having the fervor of making something good. We talk of advantage of competition in all fields, then why not in the field of cinema?

Why same house and same four five directors will be churning out products and that will define Bengal Cinema. I am definite if put to competition even these 'ruling' directors will be making much better films.

And above all one must remember that like any other subject that has to be learnt Cinema has to be learnt too. The learning can be self-taught or institutional but is not easy or quick. And it applies for all departments of film making.

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