

Tribute to Buddhadeb Dasgupta

John W. Hood

**Ullash, My Friend****Remembering A Long Friendship with Buddhadeb Dasgupta**

In late 1993 my first book on cinema, *Chasing the Truth. The Films of Mrinal Sen*, had been published and I was back in what was still Calcutta, eager to start on a new work. My friend, Biren Das Sharma, had offered the idea that I do something on the filmmakers of the generation after Ray, Sen and Ghatak, and he suggested three younger directors, one of whom was Buddhadeb Dasgupta. Biren arranged for me to meet Buddhadeb one Saturday morning, a meeting whose general aura I remember well, though I have forgotten much of the detail.

There are times when, at the initial meeting with someone, you feel as though you have known each other already for a long time. It was like that with Buddha and me. He introduced me to his wife, Parna, and his two young daughters, Babli and Shiuli, along with their domestic help, Renu, and it was a family I would feel a part of whenever I visited them in their Dhakuria flat for years after. As happens with the passing of time, nothing stays the same, and while the flat is still there, those who lived in it have gone on, two to success elsewhere in India and Parna and now Buddha into eternity. But memories remain and love does not die.

Buddha was very helpful in providing me with cassette copies of all the films he had made to that time, that is everything up to and including *Tahader Katha*. It was soon clear that I would have ample material for a book on his films without having to discuss work by other filmmakers, and soon we were spending hours together, talking about cinema in general and his films in particular. I took to his films quite easily, or perhaps they took to me. There was a rapport between Buddhadeb and me through the medium of his films, and I know that he was heartened that the book was being written, evidently, by someone who at least understood his

work. But he was also generous enough to care about my book on Mrinal Sen, introducing me to the grand old man, Chidananda Dasgupta, who, as arts editor for *The Telegraph*, gave the book invaluable publicity with a full page feature on it. Chidananda-babu would also give me sage advice as I worked my way through my book on Buddhadeb.

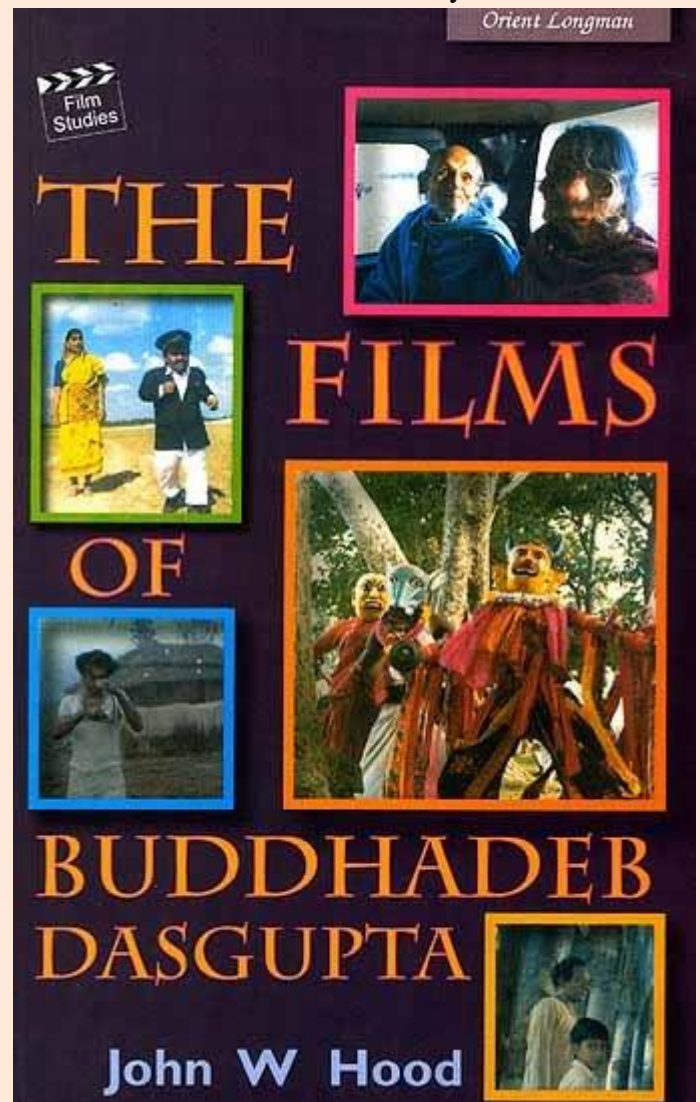
*Tahader Katha* made a profound impression on me. I was moved by the simple, unsentimental pity that suffuses the whole film, emanating not just out of Shibnath but from the other members of his family too. It was *Tahader Katha* that made it so clear to me that this filmmaker had a rare gift for composition that was aesthetically striking as well as narrative-enhancing. I also came to recognise the acute sense of economy that gives the film a discipline with which to optimally maintain its form, narrative and effect. In this light I looked again at earlier films and saw the germination of these qualities, especially in *Duratwa* and *Nim Annapurna*. And I studied *Phera* again, determined to see for myself why Buddhadeb - at that time - regarded it as his best film.

Buddhadeb had made *Bagh Bahadur* on a story by Prafulla Roy and after *Tahader Katha* he made *Charachar* on Roy's story of the same name. The two stories are beautiful, and provided a fitting base for two beautiful films. Later he would make a national award winning film - *Mondo Meyer Upakhyan* - on another Roy story. Some time in the later '90s I picked up from Buddhadeb's shelf a collection of Prafulla Roy's short stories, began reading *Manush*, and was taken. Buddhadeb introduced me to Prafulla-da, and there began an ongoing joy of translating much of his work. But that is another story.

After *Charachar*, Buddho wanted an idea for a new film. He had already introduced me to his poems, some of which I had translated and eventually the number grew into a book called *Love and Other Forms of Death. Poems of Buddhadeb Dasgupta*. Sometime in the middle of 1995 I was in Pune doing some research for my book, *The Essential Mystery. Major Filmmakers of Indian Art Cinema*, and I also had some of his poems, on which I worked from time to time as a refreshing change. There was one poem, *For Hasan*, which made me think of Buddhadeb's driver, a likeable enough rogue, and then I started musing on the cinematic possibilities that might emanate out of this character and the ideas in the poem. I rang Buddhadeb from Pune and told him what I had been thinking. When I got back to Calcutta a few days later, he was already working with those ideas on the film that would be *Lal Darja*. He told me some of his own ideas, which did not enthuse me greatly as they were at a bit of a distance from the ones I had developed, but it was his film, not mine, and I encouraged rather than disagreed. He wanted me to do the subtitles for the film, so he kept me up to date with the script, and the more I read the more I felt that this film, now becoming even more remote from my original idea, was going to be a mess. I did not want him to make it but did not have the heart to tell him. I am glad I did not tell him - at least, not until after the film had been made and it had won the Golden Lotus Award for the best film of 1997.

My book on Buddhadeb's films came out in 1998, but a revised and enlarged version, *The Films of Buddhadeb Dasgupta* was published by Orient Longman in 2005. There is also a chapter on his work in my book, *The Essential Mystery*, also published by Orient Longman, the first edition of which appeared in 2000, with a second edition, revised and enlarged, coming out in 2009. Buddho was unstinting in his praise and gratitude for my writing on his films, but was also persistently energetic in his determination to persuade me to write a book which I had always been a trifle wary of writing. Eventually I gave in and started work on *Beyond the World of Apu. The Films of Satyajit Ray*, which Orient BlackSwan brought out in 2008. Buddhadeb gloried in that book as though he had

written it himself. Confucius taught that the only way to magnify oneself was to magnify others. This is what Buddhadeb did so naturally.



Technical excellence is an obvious feature of his work from his first film to the last, yet he was by no means a practical man. Once we were coming back from a weekend at his getaway house in Mallikpur. His driver was not with us, and so I drove. I was staying in Hazra at the time, so I dropped myself off there and he drove himself home to Dhakuria. He rang me later on to tell me of the hair-raising yet cinematic experience of his drive home. I had adjusted the seat to accommodate my somewhat longer legs, and this had made it difficult for Buddho to reach the pedals. He did not know how to adjust the seat, and said that he felt as though he was in a Bunuel film with the front of the car gradually breaking away from the back. On another occasion I wanted to know the whereabouts of a certain street. He told me that I should stand in front of Rabindra Sadan and then go left. I asked him,

quite reasonably, I thought, which way I should be facing while standing in front of Rabindra Sadan. He pointed in front of himself and said, "That way." I was none the wiser. And then there was the time when he wanted me to record an interview with him for some media outlet in south India. He had a tape recorder set up, and when he turned on the switch, nothing happened. He tried this and that and nothing worked. Another machine was produced, batteries were changed, words were spoken - as though a blue word or two in English would frighten the machine into submission. Finally, after what had seemed like hours, yet another machine was found, and a quick test showed that this one did work. We started the interview. About fifteen minutes into it Buddhob looked at me sheepishly and then quietly confessed that he had forgotten to press the 'start' button. To avoid killing him, I went straight home for lunch.

However, when you keep a dog, why bark? He had others to do the technical things for him; his job was to create, inspire, direct - and he did that as well as, if not better than, anyone else. Of all his feature films I would nominate only one that is not up to the standard of the rest. Apart from awards at

international film festivals, five of his films have won a national award for best film of the year (including the three made on short stories of Prafulla Roy), with genuine masterpieces like *Tahader Katha* and *Uttara*, oddly enough, not on that list. Apart from his immense artistic talent, he brought to cinema the immeasurable warmth of his humanity, a humanity that saw stories of worth about what many would regard as negligible people. And although he dealt realistically with the pity of life, he was ruthless in exposing the sham and the corruption of the life spoilers. But always somewhere, often where you might least expect it, there was his acute and infectious sense of humour.

For long I have written 'Cheers!' at the end of a letter instead of the more formal (and stuffy) 'Yours sincerely' or whatever. Buddhob picked this up in our email correspondence, but then he wanted a Bengali version of 'Cheers!', and so he brought *ullash* into our communications. I will always be mindful of the abundant *ullash* he instilled into my life and the lives of countless others, and as he embarks on his most mysterious journey, I say, "Ullash, my dear old chum!"

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