

Tribute to Buddhadeb Dasgupta

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**Buddhadeb Dasgupta: A Humanist and Philosopher to the Core****Reminiscences, Take I**

It was a quiet afternoon in October, 2002. My first *tete-a-tete* with Buddhadeb Dasgupta took place in a Delhi hotel suite in the backdrop of the ongoing 33<sup>rd</sup> edition of the IFFI (International Film Festival of India). His newest film *Manda Meyer Upakhyan* (A Tale of a Naughty Girl, 2002) featured in the Indian Panorama, and out of sheer interest and wonderment I took an appointment with him for an exclusive interview for the daily newspaper I was working with. At first, I used to call him 'Sir', but no sooner had we started talking than he asked me to address him as Buddha-da, implying that it would be nice if I followed the most common greeting form in neighbouring states of Assam and West Bengal. After almost an hour of engaging dialogue, Buddhada enquired about the time. He was expecting a guest soon to come over and join us. I was in a soup whether to stay or to leave, as leaving earlier would enable me to fax a single reportage,

with his comments, to my office the same evening. But he had a different idea, so benevolent of him, and offered me his laptop to send my report sooner, thereby allowing me to enjoy the privilege of meeting his guest who happened to be none other than Osian's Cinefan Festival director, our *beau ideal* Aruna Vasudev.

**Reminiscences, Take II**

On a discrete evening I enjoyed a certain privilege of reciting a couple of Assamese poems to Buddhada. That was in December, 2013. He was present as a guest of honour at the opening ceremony of Gauhati Cine Club's annual international film festival sharing the dais with esteemed guest Premendra Mazumder and other dignitaries. Filmmaker Manju Bora threw a dinner next evening at her residence and I took the opportunity to present him an anthology of my poems. On a flippant side, that very day I turned 50; and Buddhada didn't mince words of great wishes

making a reclusive being like me acknowledge what it should feel to toast the golden jubilee year-mark of life. That was him, the pure soul mate who could turn the ordinary into exceptional, could add an unassuming dimension to the earthly— a distinctive quality that made for his visual delights often catching the filmgoers unaware.



(L-R: Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Manoj Barpujari, Manju Bora and Premendra Mazumder. Dec 2013)

### **Reminiscences, Take III**

Time flies. As he remained a darling of a guy, Buddhada's one more visit to Assam began with an unforgettable lecture titled "Art and Experience in Celluloid" in the middle of the month of July, 2016 (Caption Image). A packed theatre heard him for one full hour in undivided attention as he was dealing with the subject in utmost clarity of thoughts exquisitely illuminating the relation between poetry and cinema as well. Who could be better poised to deliver on this subject than him, amongst the living greats of Indian cinema! Thanks to Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University for hosting that event (KK Handiqui Memorial Lecture), it indeed gave immense pleasure to hear him talk about his understanding of the film medium and how he translated his thoughts to the moving sequences. We were also content with a precious dinner time with Buddhada at a restaurant facing the river Brahmaputra. But who would hear the sound of the flowing river when a sage was unfolding his inner self! Serendipity!!

### **The Maverick in Moving Image**

In October 2016 I found out that his latest film *Tope* (The Bait, 2016) was in the Busan International Film Festival. I happened to be there as a member of the

FIPRESCI jury; and in spite of the great strain of scheduling my essential chores, I kept aside time for catching the screening of the film. Whenever I happen to grab a solemn *filmosophy*, I try to read the visionary's *filmind* (terms coined by Daniel Frampton). As it stood out, *Tope* rang the whistles of the real and surreal, the swinging disposition of the mind against the vastness of nature in rural India (Bengal), but not without eccentricities and some travails of the humans. Those appearing real and surreal in the film are parts of three parallel stories, but ultimately cross and intertwine. Wishes of the haves and the have-nots, the given luxury and penury forming the differing ends of the narrative ultimately prove as one allegory about class, wealth and inequality. So, with all its stylized construction of the plot and subplots, the film fine-tunes the auteur's vision of a land where all is not well, not fair, all are quite far from being acceptable. It reveals the filmmaker's profound pain as a poet and as a philosopher.

Buddhada's several other films are equally strong in wishful allegorical substances. The poet keeps bonding with you in the guise of a storyteller. His story is bound to haunt you. But stories are everywhere to see, feel, interpret, both real and imagined. The point is how to tell them. Here Buddhada scores ahead of his many contemporaries. Not the characters alone, not their histrionics, it's the ambience, the dreams chased by the wounded mind, all that gives the battered souls wings to fly. In no ambiguous terms, the layers in the story lay bare the teller or painter's non-conformist dreams of uplifting the society to a justified higher state of existence. *Uttara* (The Wrestlers, 2000) for instance— where a ritualistic march of a group of dwarfs metaphorically suggests a search for an alternative world, as the present world is suffering under cruelty and greed of "tall people". They represent the stabilizing force in the geo-cultural domain the film shows where violence rules: the violence is two-fold: firstly the tussle between two local musclemen seeking the physical possession of the village buxom called Uttara and in their obsession totally heedless of unsettling lawlessness; and secondly some deeds unleashed by a stingy group of outsiders, apparently Hindu fanatics, hell



bent on annihilating a local Christian missionary. The turns and twists in the plot are clearly understood if the viewer is informed of the turmoil, declining morality experienced by the country at large.

When the layers of a cinematic tale give a mystic feeling, in Buddhadeb Dasgupta's films to be precise, they hint at the threads that are employed to examine human vices like self-interest, exploitation of the weaker, material usurpation and moral resignation. But there is always a silver lining around the dark covers: that is what *Mondo Meyer Upakhyan* sets up against the odds. Although it is based on a short story, the film meticulously uses a poem without taking precedence. There is a brothel in the centre of things, but overlooking its hustle bustle is an isolated location. That gives Buddhada's magnifying way of seeing and dispensing things, away from the usual compulsion. A mother-daughter duo fails to sort out individual priorities— the mother being an insecure prostitute, and dreaming of a future decent life is her teenage daughter who with some help from a school teacher runs away to the far-off city. Giving flight to the little girl, her dream eavesdrops on the script in the form of a poem too. And with the news of man's landing on the moon, the poem casts a spell fortifying a perspective, while making a way through the storyline. The marriage of film and poetry is challenging, but not for an adept one like Buddhada who can combine image and text from both poetry and cinema with ease. The combination deals with the abstract world of thought and feeling as well as the literal world of things producing thereby an example of what William C. Wees defined as 'Poetry-film'.

### **The Poetic beneath the Political**

It's a well known fact that Buddhadeb Dasgupta was a self-taught filmmaker; and who knows, had he been a film institute product, we wouldn't have seen his individuality as much blossomed into myriads of thoughts and in transporting those thoughts and ideas into the *imagetext* (a term borrowed from W. J. T. Mitchell's). Given a highly creative person's ability to learn a craft on his own terms, it was justified for a young Buddhadeb Dasgupta to quit the faculty of Economics at a Calcutta college. His

disillusionment with bookish tenets and working under inspecting eyes might have been kicked off by the conditions around him. A vision was shaping up quickly and it found its moorings in his early movies. It explains his tell-tale stories exploring West Bengal's tryst with the Naxalbari uprising of the late 60s and early 70s and their corollaries still farther. *Dooratwa* (Distance, 1978), *Grihajuddha* (Crossroads, 1982) and *Andhi Gali* (Dead End, 1984) – these films are interpreted as a trilogy based on those times culminating in tragic overturns, disillusionment and status quo. Each film is impregnated with political substance, as the offspring arouses deep remorse and a sense of tragic upbringing. There lies his poetry. In an essay on the relationship of poetry and cinema, Buddhada says that a fruitful poem can express peoples' resilience and its beauty without being verbose and thwarting all the suppressive bourgeois laws.

It's contextual to quote him from the same essay ("*Kobita O Chalachchitra*") where he confesses: "To speak the truth, I try to infuse my 'films' with poetic elements all the time." Shot selections and background scores in Buddhada's films successfully convey a covert relationship of language and vision, both laden with poetic ingredients. The frames as a whole strengthen and extend metaphoric implications at appropriate moments. Those moments linger on well after the film's curtain is down. Frames sing by themselves, dance too by themselves, and push the boundaries of the film and its sublime effect. It happens because the auteur could engage the viewer in a multi-layered experience of the visual and verbal, spatial and temporal, literal and figurative, along with the mundane and philosophical. His later films started giving way to delicate subjectivity, sometimes preferring the surreal and suggestive, but sometimes representational— both serving a transformation from linear to elliptical storytelling. However, the core examination remains the individual's position in a crisis-ridden society and the collective helplessness. *Ami, Yasin Ar Amar Madhubala* (The Voyeurs, 2007) can be identified as one in the cascade of films picking up innocent lives trapped in the vortex of mindless actions and decaying values. Two young men's voyeuristic adventure spells doom and the

director in his unique way registers a critique of technology serving the hedonistic drives that intrudes upon the weaker sex, followed by a critique of scary surveillance of the authority in the name of hunting down the terrorists which also jeopardizes the very existence of the marginal section of the society.

It is interesting to gauge Buddhada's way of thinking and working. Deep inside his conscious self, poetry ruled. He was charmed particularly by Jean Cocteau and Andrei Tarkovsky, two of the most revered poet-filmmakers. It wasn't an exaggeration when he said that the poetic essence, rather than the *mise-en-scene*, of cinema was more powerful in attracting him towards the medium. But at the same time he acknowledged that poetry and cinema couldn't be the same. However for him, the poetic insight should be considered indispensable by a sensitive filmmaker whether he or she is a poet or not, and it applies to the true poet as well. Tarkovsky says that cinema occupies an area between poetry and music; Buddhada agrees, but also adds that cinema's locus appears a little inclined towards poetry. The liaison – between these two arts – might have determined the method of his working too. When he wrote a film script he despised all kinds of interference; so in such a demanding situation he used to disconnect from the world outside which was a kind of self-imposed loneliness of a creative writer. A seriousness of this nature gets reflected in his films of all genres, in fiction and documentary as well. One of his finest documentaries was *A Painter of Eloquent Silence: Ganesh Pyne* (1998) that captured the life and works of one of the best known artists of the country produced by the Bengal school of painting. Some additionally created images in the film were so strong and meaningful that they tended to reside permanently in the viewer's memory.

### **My Conclusion**

A viewer needs to have some acumen to sit through, understand and enjoy Buddhada's films: one who is empathetic and well informed can get genuinely entertained by his films, as they offer food for thought and open windows for refreshing enlightenment. His views are carefully compiled in

his book on cinema titled *Swapna, Samay O Cinema*. If a reader goes through this collection of articles, it becomes clear that 'entertainment' is a word that exists in one side of the brain that caters to the need of immediate satisfaction, and it varies from person to person, culture to culture. And I won't hesitate to tell that his kind of films touches me, and so, inspires me to pay my tribute in his memory in my own way– as to be honest, I haven't seen all his films, so in a way I'm not in a position to draw the concluding remarks on the aesthetics of his body of work. In the same vein I would like to see the newest and expanded edition of John W. Hood's book *The Films of Buddhadeb Dasgupta* published first in 2005.

For obvious reasons Buddhada's films were too hard for the common men and exhibitors of his own country to accept, only to pinpoint the omnipresent tussle between popular culture and the avant-garde. But if one is open to the reception his films earned at the national and international levels taking it as a yardstick of quality and uniqueness, then there is a lot to acknowledge. From Wikipedia I can count 27 awards he received in his lifetime. These include eight numbers of Golden Lotus at the National Film Awards– six for the best film and two for best direction. He was conferred with a lifetime achievement award at the Spain International Film Festival in Madrid. He made 24 fiction films, mostly full-length features, and 14 documentaries including a few made for television. In a film-centric working life spanning five decades (1968-2018), Buddhada won major awards and recognitions across the globe including such highly competitive venues like those in Venice, Berlin, Locarno, and Karlovy Vary.

His contribution to the professed Indian New Wave or Neorealist Cinema had been canonized from the outset itself when his trilogy on the aftermath of the Naxalite Movement was reviewed as cognate with the Kolkata Trilogies of Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen of early 70s. But he created a genre unto himself that found no parallel among his peers– as if what Agnes Varda did in and out of the French Nouvelle Vague. However, going by the depth of his works, one thing I would like to assert is: a person whose cinema mixes realism and lyricism in their authentic beauty cannot be termed

naively a poet by heart. Deep underneath, Buddhadeb Dasgupta was a thoughtful humanist and a hard core philosopher who didn't waste a single frame of his films in boisterous and pretentious diatribe, rather pulled up the lost, perplexed viewers to a new plane of realization of their own existence and surroundings. Of course, he had excelled in penning poetry in Bangla and mastered the film

language in its universality. But these pursuits were his outer signature marks; deep inside he was a radical humanist, a soulful democratic persona and a visionary philosopher. We're going to miss him a lot in the days to come.

[Photo Courtesy: Premendra Mazumder]

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