Tribute to Buddhadeb Dasgupta
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Buddhadeb Dasgupta (1944 – 2021): A Brief Analysis

Introduction

Buddhadeb Dasgupta is perhaps one of the very few Indian filmmakers who changed his style, treatment, form and content as a filmmaker without bothering about whether this would alienate his audience from his films or whether they would come closer to his films.

From straight, linear narratives adapted from noted post-Tagorean Bengali writers like Sirsendu Mukhopadhyay, Dibyendu Palit, Prafulla Ray and Kamal Kumar Majumdar, he slowly but very surely drifted towards a poetic language often inspired by his own beautiful poetry centred around ordinary men and women who would normally be considered "failures." In effect, if we look at his later films. We find men and women we do not even hear, look at or

read about and how they either keep searching for an illusory world like Kusumpur (*Kaal Purush*), or a bird-catcher like Lakhinder (*Charachar*) who sets birds free instead of selling them in the market because through their 'freedom' he finds his own liberation in some strange way.

Or, let us remember the crazy postman of the local post office (*Tope*) who perches himself on the branch of a huge tree and makes the neighbouring monkeys his "family." Repeated requests from his wife, mother, the village head and other elders cannot shift him from that tree branch. He throws away all the letters he is supposed to reach to their addressees but he decides he will not do this. In *Uro Jahaj*, Bacchu Mandal, a mere motor mechanic, chances

upon an old WW2 plane, paints it and is determined that he will fly in it one day.

Changing tracks to non-linear narratives

Dasgupta, half way through his career as filmmaker, toyed relentlessly with surrealistic magic, with visual poetry as cinematic metaphors, with what he terms "extended reality" and with a collage of characters, incidents and interactions that are not necessarily connected and may not add up to a cohesive or symmetrical whole. This creative independence is also a part of cinematic expression that can bend rules, break rules, defy rules, create rules or simply work on the assumption that rules do not exist. But there is a 'pattern' to this and sometimes, it could lead to the complete deconstruction of all that cinema stands for. Godard threw all so-called rules out of the window and created his own. His Indian audience and even the exhibitors shied away from releasing his films and we could only get to watch them at some film festival, or at a special noon screening, or when clubbed with the release of his books of poetry.

Kaalpurush travels on parallel tracks, one offering the father's (Ashwini) point of view through fluid flashbacks and the other detailing the simple, honest, lonely but content life experiences of Sumanto, his ambitionless son, who takes joy from the simple notes of a flute played by the flute-seller Idris who travels everywhere with his handicapped son Abdul. The flute seller, his son and the sad notes from his flute are markers drawing the line between Sumanto's transition from the world of reality to the world of imagination, illusion, fantasy and back.

Deception is a cinematic strategy Dasgupta hit on in his last films that led his audience into a celluloid jigsaw puzzle that does not exist. He did it very well too and *Swapner Din* perhaps, is the best example. *Swapner Din* begins with a journey that is destined to proceed from point A to point B but loses track somewhere along the way, gets helplessly and dangerously out of control to reach somewhere other than point B – in physical terms, in metaphorical terms, and often, even in philosophical terms.

The real people - the three new friends encounter along the journey, a drunk, three villagers and an old man driving his car, are presented as 'unreal' caricatures of humanity, ending with Paresh's big boss who gives him a rather loud piece of his mind across the telephone. You discover that the film does not deal with terrorism at all. Yet, terrorism, the film subtly points out, is as omnipresent as the squirrel crawling up the dashboard of the police jeep. Violence without an agenda is as powerful in shaping the destiny of three very ordinary men and women as is the power of deceit seemingly innocent villagers are capable of exercising on innocent city people.

In *Ami Yasin O Amar Madhubala*, Buddhadeb Dasgupta harps on the atomization of the individual – where the individual, enslaved to and by technology, is reduced to an atom that renders him incapable of natural communication with fellow-humans in everyday life till in the end, he discovers that he is both perpetrator and victim of the technology that was once his source of livelihood. *Ami, Yasin Aar Amar Madhubala* is a powerful but scary indictment on the world of sophisticated technology we live in and offers an insight into how it can trap us in a no-exit situation we can never get out of.

Kaalpurush, Swapner Din, Janala, *Aami Yasin O Amar Madhubala,* and *Uro Jahaj* made generous use of visual poetry, allegory and magic elements of "extended reality." But these did not take away from the core narrative and enriched the film differently. They did not make his audience feel stupid.

But serious problems began from *Anwar Ka Ajab Kissa* which continued in *Tope.* In AKAK, Dasgupta pushed his treatment of "extended reality" over the edge where, what began as an interesting exploration of how a small-time detective with the incurable habit of getting personally involved in his

"cases" wandered away, literally and cinematically, into arid places in Bihar and elsewhere, where Anwar searches for his childhood. His identity and his detecting skills, if ever there were any, are drowned under the surrealism of a bicycle, his father's image, a stray dog, a few mysterious women here and there that go completely over the head of the audience. The same argument goes for *Tope* which, though adapted from a Narayan Gangopadhyay story, was twisted and turned completely out of shape by Dasgupta so much out of shape that it failed to underscore his logic of "extended reality" and magic realism and the film comes out badly scarred by the director's cutting into the literary original.

Dasgupta's Trilogy

Dooratwa, *Grihajuddha* and *Andhi Gali* form a loose trilogy because the common thread that links the three films is the notion of disillusionment with idealism wanded political commitment and the spilling over of this discontent and restiveness into the personal lives of the subjects concerned. Each film has an independent story sourced from an original literary piece, re-scripted to suit the needs and interpretations of the director and his medium of cinema. Each film has its own statement and its own plot and theme. Each film is complete unto itself. Yet, they are placed in a time-space setting that has the same political history of extreme Leftist politics in West Bengal.

The male protagonist in each of these films has a background of Leftist commitment in his past. The present finds him trying to distance himself and run away from this past. This 'running away' somewhere along the way, turns into a running away from Life itself, and from the responsibilities and relationships that form the core of life. Contrary to common expectations, the three films did not follow sequentially. Dasgupta broke the 'continuity' after his first full-length feature *Dooratwa* with *Neem Annapoorna* in 1979, a film that is in a different realm altogether. He then made *Grihajuddha* and *Andhi Gali* one after another.

The three films are set against the background of the Naxalite movement. The protagonist of each film is a former Naxalite, someone who was once theoretically dedicated to the building of a better world and willing, if necessary, to lay down his life for the 'cause', but who was subsequently ideologically set adrift only to return with neither design nor cathartic submission, to his middle-class moorings. The three films depict the dimming of the flame of idealism and the lighting in its place of the fire of respectability, kindled by the ardour of acquisitiveness.[i]

The titles of each film, taken sequentially, suggest a narrowing of vision without a corresponding increase in focus. *Dooratwa*, which means 'distances' suggests a constant widening of spaces between and among people engineered, almost unconsciously, by the protagonist, Mandar. He tries to bridge this 'gap' but we do not know if his attempt to 'correct' his past behaviour will bear fruit in the future. *Grihajuddha* has been translated by Dasgupta as 'crossroads' in English. The precise dictionary translation of the Bengali word is 'domestic conflict.' Dasgupta widens the horizons of this meaning to embrace a small world in conflict, where people meet at a certain crossroad they have been pushed into, and are vague about their bearings, about the risks

involved, the lurking dangers, and about the responsibilities they are circumstantially forced to take up. This 'small' world is a microcosm of the larger world out there, where moral decay in one group of people or one individual victimizes another individual or group.

The victimizer, such as Mandar in *Dooratwa*, Bijon in *Grihajuddha* and Hemanta in *Andhi Gali*, evolve into victims sucked into a vicious circle of their own making, from which exit seems difficult, though not impossible. *Andhi Gali*, Dasgupta's first film in Hindi, means 'blind alley.' Hemanta who seeks to run away from his past, finds himself trapped in a blind alley in the end from which perhaps there is no escape. The hero of *Andhi Gali* (Kulbhushan Kharbanda), the symbol of the ideologically fickle middle class, is an extension of Mandar of *Dooratwa* and Bijon of *Grihajuddha*. The ideological Jaya (Deepti Naval), a symbol of lost innocence and purity in *Andhi Gali*, is an extension of Anjali and Nirupama in the first two films.
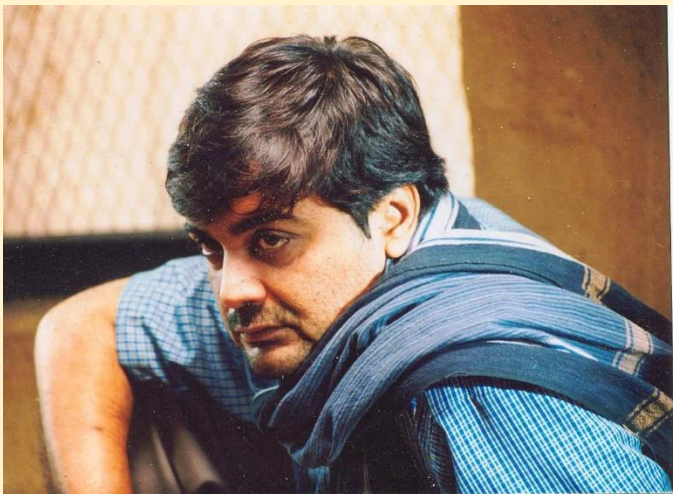
Conclusion

The trilogy demonstrates Dasgupta's concern about depicting the *social forces* that go to shape the destinies of individuals rather than trying to explore the *psychology* of individual characters. Yet, he never permits his characters to be reduced to cliché, cardboard characters used to mouth his own ideologies or simply to make a point. The distances created by Mandar in *Dooratwa* are sustained, or perhaps heightened within the inner conflict in *Grihajuddha* and stretch towards an unknown infinity in *Andhi Gali*.

The inner conflicts of Mandar, Bijon and Hemant are not identical, but the consequences they encounter in ideological terms, are. Is this because these men are lesser than they believed themselves to be? How does one explain their moral cowardice and decay once they have quit their political commitments in the past? Or, has their disillusionment with the movement they once believed in has led to disillusionment with themselves? Are these three men symbols of the ideologically fickle middle class of Calcutta in the 1970s? These significant questions are universal and timeless. They mark this Dasgupta trilogy as the most outstanding political and social statement of the times they reflect.

Dasgupta's departure from the real world ends a friendship of around three decades leaving me wondering whether he is now enjoying a surrealistic life in extended reality.

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[i] Hood, John, W.: Time and Dreams – The Films of Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1998, p.18.

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