

Article

Ujjal Chakraborty

***Guldasta*: A Film on Heart Brain Coherence**



Guldasta (2020) is a revelation for me, mainly because it has raised three important questions –

1. Can our heart think? – Arpita Chatterjee, the lead actor
2. Is society a magnetic field? – Arjun Dutta, the author-director
3. Are our fingers as expressive as our faces? – Arpita, actor

The questions, philosophical in nature, haven't been raised via spoken words. Arpita has ignited in me the questions through her profound performance while Arjun through his story.

How? Let me analyze their method step by step.

The film has been woven around a couple. The wife – Shreerupa – intuitively understands people through her heart while the husband – Arnab – does the same solely with his brain.

Consequently, the wife often lands directly on the truth, while the husband, in spite of planning everything meticulously, often misses the target.

The director has placed the two diverse weapons – the heart and the brain – in two parallel tracks. It has been very clearly depicted through concrete incidents that the husband, being dependent solely on his brain, has totally forgotten the art of anger management which is necessary for his further growth in the corporate community. The result?

He has grown an unnecessary habit of over observing the small and inoffensive gestures of his colleagues. He has also become suspicious of even a poor woman – pitifully naïve as well as nice – entering his bedroom with his wife.

On the other hand, his wife – Shreerupa/Arpita – can effortlessly understand even a fairly unknown person’s mind due to her natural dependence on the ‘little brain lurking in her heart’.

Here doubt can be raised about my usage of the word ‘heart’. And the doubt is a valid one. Has it been used metaphorically? Or literally? Arpita, through her stunning performance, has raised the question and suggested the answer as well.

Is it possible to realize anything through heart?

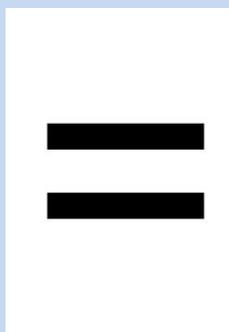
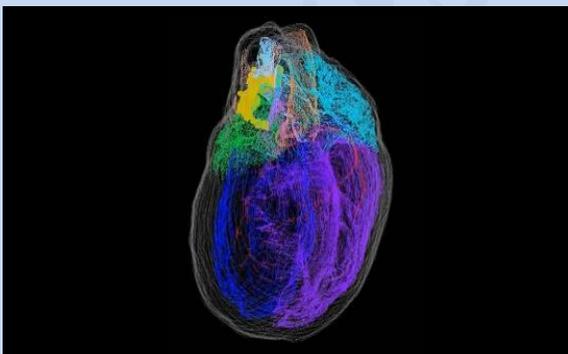
The Scientific Basis

Yes. It’s literally true. It’s a scientific truth. In 1991, a cluster of brain cells were detected in the heart. It was discovered by Dr. John Andrew Armour, Neuro-cardiologist, University of Montreal.

Therefore, it’s quite possible – physiologically as well as neurologically – to comprehend something solely through our hearts, the blood pumping organ throbbing inside our ribcage. Therefore, Shreerupa, intensely portrayed by Arpita Chatterjee, is a rational depiction of a woman who can feel the hidden truths without any prior caution apparently essential to survive in the urban surroundings. (For example, Arpita doesn’t have to interrogate Dolly, the saleswoman, to believe in her inner kindness and integrity.)

Strange! Isn’t it? The situations involving Arpita are so convincing that I’m more or less inclined to believe that both the actor and the author were aware of the scientific discovery before making the film.

The brain-cells in our hearts have been named **Sensory Neurites** which can feel, think, remember and conclude on their own. In other words, the ‘Heart-brain’ is independent of the brain encased in the skull.



(Ref: Dr. J. A. Armour, *Experimental Physiology*, a journal, volume 93, issue 2)

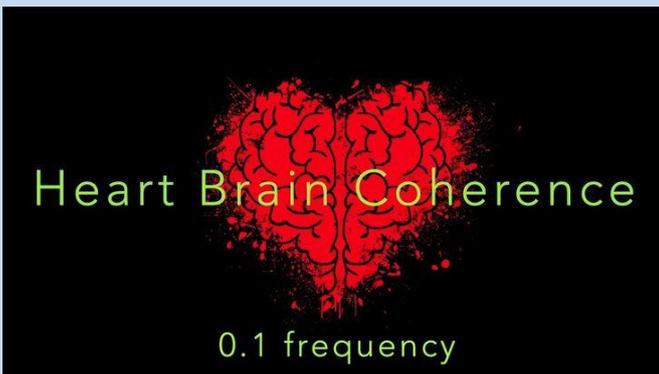
Ego can’t tarnish the heart-brain. So can’t the social stigma. Therefore, heart’s comprehension of people and milieu is a great deal faster. It’s instant. That’s what we traditionally call intuition. Therefore, physiologically speaking, the field of ‘Sensory Neurites’ is the fertile land to cultivate intuition.

Arpita has magically expressed her intuition through her performance. But why is the element so important to understand humanity? Let me give you a scientific reason.

Intuition is active every moment of anyone's life. How? A lifelong conversation goes on between the 'Heart-brain' and the 'Skull-brain'. The frequency in which they talk is very low – 0.1 Hertz.

Heart Brain = Skull Brain = 0.1 Hertz.

All are tuned with each other.



That's not all. The 'Heart Brain' (Sensory Neurites) has been found embedded in the DNA of the earliest Humans born 200 million years ago. Amazing, isn't it? Therefore, intuition must have played a decisive role in the astonishing growth of the human creativity. (*Gregg Braden, Geologist and an American science writer, is propagating the idea throughout the world.*)

That's why Arpita's own style of performance is so vital, both scientifically and historically.

Arpita's Intelligent Heart

I have felt that mainly through Arpita's performance, *Guldasta* can deftly harmonize the brain and the heart. But how has she achieved it?

Let me describe you a stunningly beautiful moment.

The wedding necklace gifted to Arpita by her mother is lost. Is it a theft? The husband, obviously clever and experienced, thinks so. He is also sure of one fact. The sales-woman often visiting their flat has stolen it. On the other hand, Arpita, deep in her heart, believes in the sales-woman's innocence. But she is incapable of gathering any concrete reason to prove it. One day, the lost necklace suddenly reappears from the fold of a golden Saree that successfully camouflaged it. Arpita feels a surge of happiness in her. Suddenly relieved and happily surprised, she stumbles one step backwards. It seems that it's the greatest triumph of her life, though apparently, she doesn't have anything to do with it. At the very moment, what Arpita does is stunning. After years, she calls her husband shouting and instinctively holds, with total conviction, her husband's left hand with her own left palm. She can only utter a broken sentence piercing her constant sobbing – "I told you... it wasn't Dolly... It wasn't Dolly..."

The first detail is stunningly revealing. Arpita uses her left palm to hold her husband's hand. It's very unusual; because she always uses her left palm to control her wildly shivering right palm. Therefore, the left palm is Arpita's secret and personal weapon to retain her rapidly vanishing dignity. And, lo, what a change! Now, she is offering her left palm to her husband. It's a true gesture of pure reconciliation. She is offering her personal palm to her husband. The symbolic and philosophical value of the gesture is infinite. It symbolizes disarmament. It also symbolizes surrender.



Simultaneously, through whom she is expressing her love? It's a sunning revelation.



We suddenly feel that Arpita is totally mingled herself with the sales-woman. This kind of total mingling is almost impossible to achieve in the urban milieu. But I can't find an iota of hesitation in Arpita's performance at the moment. Her surrender is total. And it's not at all easy. Arpita, wholly immersed in oblivion of her status, fully surrenders her soul to a person representing much lower strata of the society. It's an unprecedented achievement by any standard.

Discovery of 2020/21

For me, *Guldasta* is the discovery of 2021. The reasons of my being fascinated with the film are complex to explain with the required lucidity. But one point must be confessed here.

It has stimulated my intelligence and simultaneously stirred me to cry. It's a rare feat that could be achieved by a very few of the classics like Chaplin's *City Lights* and Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar*.

Since the film is saturated with deeper and very subtle connotations, I could have written about 10,000 more words for properly analyzing it. But I've preferred to keep it slightly below 4000 words, leaving the rest of the discoveries to the readers.

I've chosen to analyze two more remarkable aspects of the film – Arjun's Magnet and Arpita's Mathematics.

Let's elaborate these two points.

Arjun's Magnet

Two iron lumps. A copper coil. And electricity.

The total story told in the film is a resultant of the interaction between the four.

Let's imagine the two leading women of the film as a couple of iron lumps covered with rust. Their shiny surfaces are forgotten for a long time. They also can't remember their iron core. They've accepted the rust as the final reality; a reality that is unalterable.

What can make them free from their rusty existence?

A copper coil.

They can forget the rust if a copper coil, moderately thick, simultaneously embraces them.

And what does the copper coil need? It needs electricity.

The rusted lumps will instantly turn into magnets if electricity – even moderately powered – is passed through them. And, being magnets, they will induce their magnetic fields on other rusted iron lumps of the family (and society, as well). All persons close to them will be turned into magnets. And, according to the main property of magnets, the attractions between them are bound to increase. This, in short, is the essence of the film.

Arjun Dutta, the young writer-director of *Guldasta*, depicts the society as a magnetic field. Why is it a field? Simply because the characters depicted here are gradually getting magnetized. How? Let me tell you the reason.

Let's imagine two women, naïve and stressed. They are so naïve that they don't know how to diminish the weight of the burdens – familial as well as social – imposed on them. Consequently, their personal lives are slipping out from their grips.



They don't know how to tighten their fingers. Neither families nor the colleges taught them to do so.

But, at the same time, they have dormant propensities of being transformed into magnets; or, rather, resurrected as magnets. Why aren't they getting transformed? What's missing?

What they miss is a magnetic field on which they can stand with their spines straightened. Since it isn't a science fiction, the magnetic field can't be created by a magnet stolen from a physics laboratory. The role should be played by a human being – a real person, since others are humans.

In the film, the moment they get the required magnetic field, both of them start behaving like magnets, capable of attracting and repelling according to their own choices.

The field has been induced by a mysterious person, a saleswoman – a door to door canvasser to be precise – of products ranging from superfluous cosmetics to crucial health supplements. The woman's name is Dolly, who appears to be an appendage to the posh housing complex. But, ironically and unpredictably, the saleswoman induces the magnetic field surrounding the rusted magnets. What she sells, often push-sells, become trivial. Products gain least importance in the director's style of unfolding the bud of the story with many petals. Dolly, the canvasser, gains more importance than what she sells.

What does Dolly do? She knows and remembers the talents dormant in her clients. She takes care of the mundane problems while she inspires them to nourish their talents. Therefore, the canvasser is the magnet inducing the strong magnetic field around the couple of harassed ladies representing the higher strata of the contemporary Kolkata.

Though, it must be said at the same time that the film has a mysterious quality of being timeless. How? The incidents could've taken place in the colonial Calcutta of the early 1930s. Even in the 1850s, when a canvasser meeting a lonely woman in the afternoons was a daily affair. Apart from the plush offices with slick laptops, not much has been changed. The loneliness of the Kolkata women remains the same since the days of *Charulata*.

From this point, instead of using the metaphorical words (magnets etc.), I will use the names of the actors/characters to give the due importance to the film, conceived and written with rare sensitivity.

Arpita's Mathematics

The other woman played by Debjani knew the canvasser long before the film starts. Therefore, what is mainly depicted in the film is the gradual change of Shirupa/Arpita.

The canvasser, quite unintentionally, is making Arpita aware of her beauty, unobserved and unappreciated for so long. Arpita is also being aware of her own inner goodness. How? She is finding that cynicism has failed to cripple her heart in spite of spending years in an atmosphere of utter negligence.

How does she know that she is still good at heart? The reason is simple. She never feels any suspicion about the goodness of the canvasser. She still remains a person who is aware of the goodness of all the people surrounding her.

Arpita's performance radiates an important message. Being intuitively aware of the goodness of others is an essential property that makes a good human being. Not only in *Guldasta*, Arpita can spontaneously radiate the message through her performance in other films as well – even in *Shab*, which is an otherwise pessimistic film directed by Onir.

What does the word 'awareness' in this context? Let's replace awareness with consciousness, a word with profounder philosophical connotation.

And what is consciousness, after all? It can be defined in this short sentence – consciousness is an emergent phenomenon. This is a special property emerging from a special arrangement of things. For example, consciousness emerges from a special arrangement of billions of neurons in our brains. We will lose our intelligence, the moment the arrangement is slightly altered. Therefore, arrangement of things and elements surrounding a person is important to make her more sensitive as well as creative.

After regularly meeting the afternoon canvasser, the creativity dormant in Arpita is revived. She even starts practicing Kathak, the dance she used to love since her childhood.

Consequently, the petals of Arpita's mind start blooming beneath the surface of her crippling anemia and uncontrollable nervousness.

Arpita never discusses her ailments with Dolly, the canvasser. Yet, when alone, she finds it difficult to diminish the intensity of her nervousness.

In the scenes depicting her ailments, Arpita shows her knowledge of human psychology and her spontaneous talent to express the emotional states her character is passing through. When performing alone, Arpita is unsurpassable.

Why is she unsurpassable?

I'll try to analyze what she has done on the screen when alone.

Arpita has done an unusual experiment with her palms and fingers.

Surprisingly, she has expressed almost all the emotional states of her character with her fingers. Done with remarkable intelligence, she didn't have to compromise with her innate subtlety while doing so. It's outstanding achievement indeed.

Here she reminds me of Bibi Anderson, the Swedish actress who is globally known for her magical performances in a number of timeless films – including the immortal 'The Seventh Seal' – directed by Ingmar Bergman. With sparkling eyes and pronounced jaw-line, Arpita's face bears a number of striking similarities with that of a young Bibi Anderson. The similarities between the telling usages of their fingers are most remarkable.



No, they do not use their fingers merely to enhance the beauty of their gestures that are otherwise natural. In other words, they do not use their fingers as mere decorations to attract our attention. On the contrary, they use their fingers to reveal their innermost psychological states. It's indeed a rare feat. (Here I suggest you to study the usage of Bibi Andersson's hands – gradually getting restless – during her first meeting with David at the latter's place in *The Touch* directed by Ingmar Bergman.)

Along with her remarkable face, Arpita's fingers have mirrored all the emotional states of Shirupa of *Guldasta*.

Fingers are rarely used in Indian cinema as an effective tool of expressing the entire spectrum of the emotional states of a person. Actors, as well as directors, depend mainly on faces. Fingers are used

sporadically here and there in an entire film. Therefore, the gestures created with fingers often fail to create any lasting impact in people's mind.

May I suggest one of the reasons of the failure? Anything done sporadically often fails. Thus, a gesture created with fingers is often passes unobserved. To make one particular gesture memorable, an actor has to create a series of nearly similar gestures – with small variations – running throughout a film. It will diminish the suddenness of a particular gesture. And the probability of the recurrence of nearly similar gestures makes the spectators attentive, as they try to anticipate its following recurrence. An easy example will help us understand my proposition.

Let's imagine 4 numbers, chosen haphazardly, painted on a wall. The numbers are ---
4, 73, 9, 34 ...

Even a lazy glance is enough to tell us that the above numbers are no way connected with each other. Therefore, if we see 4 and 73 together, we cannot predict the emergence of 9, the subsequent number.

But if the numbers painted on a wall are – 2, 6, 18, *** ?

In this case it's quite easy to predict the fourth number, 54. How have we got it? We've got it simply by multiplying the third number – 18 – by 3. Why? Because our mind has easily recognized the special characteristic of the sequence of numbers. How?

We are getting a particular number of the sequence just by multiplying its previous number by 3. Therefore, the pattern hidden in the sequence of numbers is easily recognizable.

Easy recognisability always creates beauty in life as well as in arts. A song always bursts into beauty the moment it returns to the melody of its first few bars – the ascending notes, for instance, of a Raga. Any recurring motif infuses a special beauty into a musical play – the chorus sung in varying tempos by the protagonist's friends (the *Sakhees*), for instance, in Tagore's 'Chitrangada'. We always anticipate the next recurrence of their enchanting chorus.

Therefore, the recurrence of a motif – with minor variations – inspires spectators to anticipate its subsequent appearances. And we remain emotionally charged throughout the fresco/opera/film as our minds are engrossed in anticipating the recurrence of a leitmotif. One of the beautiful examples of this is the series



of lotus, blooming in various postures, in the paintings of Ajanta.

Therefore, the recurrence of a leitmotif is the heart of all human endeavours – music, mathematics, fresco paintings and so on – throughout human history.

That's what Arpita has done with her fingers in *Guldasta*.

What has she exactly done? She has created a series of gestures – akin to a beautiful sequence of numbers found in Mathematics.

Now let me explain in concrete terms the pattern she has created.

Arpita creates Shirupa, a lonely housewife whose husband has got involved into a passionate relationship with a woman possibly slightly younger to his wife. Reason? Husband often accuses Shirupa to be cold, unusually cold.

What does cold mean in this context? It means a person who is incapable of protesting against the blunt injustices openly being done to her. Prolonged repression has shattered her nerves causing involuntary tremors of her right palm. Being shy of the tremors, she obviously wants to keep it a secret. As a result, she wants to stop it. How?

She holds her shivering right palm with all of her left fingers. That's not all. She increases the pressure of her left fingers according to the ferocity of her helplessness. Her efforts make her a pathetic figure. Often, she holds the entire right palm, often she presses hard her left thumb on her shivering right palm.

We find that the pressure of her left fingers is gradually increasing throughout the film. It has a special significance. The intensity of humiliation surrounding her is steadily increasing. The pressure of her fingers is directly proportional to the humiliation she feels.

Now let's analyze the geometric progression created by Arpita with her fingers.



Remember a situation. The husband's mobile starts ringing when Arpita (Shri), in her mid 30s, is trying to get some sleep lying beside him. She knows whose call is this. She also knows who can wield the power over her husband by calling him after midnight. It's Riya, the husband's paramour. In spite of knowing this, Arpita tries to maintain a façade of civilized tranquillity while being tormented inwardly.

How does she do it?

She just caresses her right wrist with the forefinger of her left hand. Her attempt is grimly feeble. The feebleness erodes after a while. And Arpita has to employ all the five fingers along with her left palm to control the wild tremor of her right palm.

How? And why?

The husband, having got extremely angry and humiliated, goes to the balcony to scold her GF who thinks it hilarious to shred the remaining bond – already weak and vanishing – between her BF and his wife. After having completed the 'routine' scolding, the hubby, on returning to the bedroom, doesn't find his wife in bed. Where has she gone? He knows it.

He comes to the toilet door which is bolted from inside. Arpita has locked herself inside. The hubby, drowned in the feeling of guilt, waits nervously near the bolted door.

What the wife is doing?

Cut to Arpita.

Arpita, sitting on the commode, is trying to control her violently shaking right palm by tightly pressing on it all the five fingers of her left hand. It's a terrible portrayal – unabashedly truthful – of the mental agony a woman often has to endure in her married life.

But for achieving this, she has to depend on an 'art' that's closer to mathematics. She creates a series which is called geometrical progression – GP, in short. How?

She is just increasing the power being employed by her left fingers to minimise the tremor.

How?

Say, the power she employs while caressing her right wrist is, say, 2 – while lying on the bed beside her husband.

If so, the power she has to employ to control the tremor while locked in the toilet must be three times stronger. If so, it must be $2 \times 3 = 6$.

Therefore, we start anticipating the recurrence of Arpita's effort to control the tremor. We aren't really aware of our anticipation. But we must remember, at the same time, that the human brain is made of more than one hundred billion neurons working simultaneously to understand the meaning of everything,

close and distant. Therefore, it's not possible for us to say that our brains can't recognise the pattern created by a GP series that's being born in the palms of an actor.

After a few days the inevitable disaster happens. The hubby's GF storms their living room when Arpita is preparing the breakfast. Before occupying a chair close to his BF, she almost orders Arpita to bring for her a cup of hot tea.

Arpita, once again, feels awkwardly trapped. She can neither flee from the situation nor fight the girl. Without having anything better to do, she goes to the kitchen where her nervous system completely betrays her. When the hot water is spilling over the boiling pan, she is busy minimizing the brutal tremor of her right palm. How? She violently presses her left thumb on her shaking right palm.

The power she is applying now is at least three times stronger than the power she had applied on her right palm while she was in the toilet.

Therefore, Arpita's action has created a geometric sequence –
2, 6, 18 ...

It's a clear mathematical pattern that instantly stimulates the spectator's brains and intensifies their emotion.

Creating clear patterns throughout a play/film with small gestures is a great art. It requires an alert intelligence which is seldom found.

I believe it's a special contribution of Arpita Chatterjee to the Indian cinema

I think I shouldn't venture beyond the realm created by three of our themes – Thinking Heart, Magnetic Field and Expressive Palm.

Further writing may entrap the essay into the groove of clichés.



Real Life is My Driving Force – Arpita Chattopadhyay
An Interaction with the Author

Ujjal – Congratulations Arpita, for your astonishing performance.

Arpita – Thank you Ujjal da.

Ujjal – I've loved the way you used your fingers to express nearly all the nuances of the woman's mind. Stunning.

Arpita – Thanks again, though these are not very easy to observe.

Q – Yet those have added special meanings to your overall performance. I'd like to understand the process of your preparing a character.

(Arpita stared at me with her questioning eyes. She is withdrawn yet inquisitive.)

Q – Do you plan each and every action before shooting?

Arpita – No. It isn't necessary. Overall planning increases creativity, it's true. But extremely minute planning hampers flexibility.

Q – What’s your groundwork then?

Arpita – I mostly depend on my emotional responses to the situations being shot. Moments are important. The situations, the dialogues, other characters surrounding me often ignite in me a spectrum of spontaneous emotions that are instinctively expressed through my eyes, my lips and fingers and so on.

Q – Now I can see. That’s why you are so flowing before camera. Yet, I’m very curious to know about the conscious areas of your thought process ... the areas you’re aware of ...

Arpita (Thoughtful) -- I depend on three things – Mingling, Memorizing and Measuring.

Firstly, I try to mingle myself totally with the person whom I’m portraying. Best moments of acting in a film are those when I feel my own self slowly getting dissolved into the self of the character. It’s a true ecstasy. It’s liberating.

How do I mingle?

Close and repeated readings of the script help me discover the subtler aspects – apparently not easy to observe – of the character as well the story.

Q – Do you have to depend on psychology books for better understanding?

Arpita – I think it’s not really necessary, at least for me.

Q – If so, what drives you towards deeper understanding of human souls?

Arpita – Real life is my driving force. Life itself.

Q – Would you kindly elaborate?

Arpita (Nostalgic) – Since my childhood I’ve been learning about life from my personal observations. The fruit? Mimicking close friends and relatives. (smiles) When I grew up, I started depending more on my direct experiences. It’s the most significant process for the expansion of an actor’s talent.

Q – So you cultivate your performance in the fertile land of personal experiences?

Arpita – Yes. That’s my foundation.

Q – The following step?

Arpita – Secondly, screenplays often stir my own memory. I find myself in a few situations described in the screenplays. The author’s experiences overlap with mine. It attracts me more to the script.

Q – Can you identify at least one phase during which you have to remain totally conscious about what you are doing?

Arpita – Yes. Certainly. Can everything be accomplished by mere emotion? No. Therefore I too have to go through a conscious phase. It’s a bit intellectual in nature.

Q – Surprised, I was waiting with abated breath to know one of the great secrets of an elusive art – acting.

Arpita – Let me put it as simply as possible. While reading the script, I try to imagine two of the extreme limits of my character’s behavior – i.e. what she can do in total tranquility, and what she can in complete madness. These two extreme behaviors create a pair of brackets between which I try to confine myself. It helps me maintain the artistic balance.

Suddenly I’ve felt in me a joy of learning something new. I have felt that I’ve got what I had hoped for before starting the interview. I’ve got three mantras – Mingling, Memorizing and Measuring.

- Mingling – Getting dissolved into the character.
- Memorizing – Remembering similar moments.
- Measuring – Measuring the limits.

Performing art is a beautiful triangle created between these three points. Arpita has defined it for me.

▲ Mr. Ujjal Chakraborty, artist and teacher, is an internationally recognized Ray Scholar and National Film Award Winner in 2010 for writing *The Director’s Mind*, a book on film making. Based in Kolkata.