

Critique

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Uttara: Myth and Modernity



Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
The Second Coming – W.B. Yeats

UTTARA: BUDDHADEB DASGUPTA (2000)

In 2003, the Australian priest Graham Stein was burnt to death along with his two kids in Orissa by the members of a fundamentalist group. Kalburgi was murdered in 2015. In 2017 Gouri Lankesh was shot dead. The common hitman was Ganesh Miskin. Obvious when religious fanaticism is let loose anarchy settles in as poets, rationalists and people who demand fulfilment of human rights become an endangered species. In this context *Uttara*, a contemporary classic becomes a prophetic cinema and more relevant day by day with the passage of turbulent times.

Buddhadeb Dasgupta creates lyrical cinematography telling stories possible on the screen. The trees stand still and shed leaves. This particular and specific scene is repeated thrice in the film *Uttara*. Against the background of vast nature, calm, repetitive and poignant, human violence continues to conglomerate and violation of humanity is captured from a distant yet empathetic point of view.

As the country gets more and more infested with religious fanaticism, groups form. Some champion fanaticism. Some try to escape. The protestors are loners, left to die.

Dasgupta is never a loud protestor. The jeep from the town comes in and goes out and just once in

the film, the pastor is being charged by a villager regarding the orphan boy:

‘His original name is Rakhali. Why do you call him Matthew?’

The precision and subtlety of the dialogues are the treasure of the film, that portrays gross physicality, fanaticism, corruption, lust and pure love in every montage.

Each and every frame is pregnant with meaningful situations that turn to stories. Based on the novel of Samaresh Basu, *Uratiya*, the film *Uttara* is a visual pleasure as well as an eternally thought-provoking narrative on screen. Trees shed leaves, birds chirp, music adds to the sublimity and in the horizon there is a single tree. A jeep takes entry and confronts the flock of cows. Men in the jeep are alcoholic. Headlights of the jeep can be seen in the dark and a village woman goes near the jeep. Once again, the vast landscape water drips. A group of folk dancers take entry far away and the three hooligans from town indulge in knife play. The dwarfs pass by the tree. The tree has an elephant trunk, one of the hooligans whistle at the village girl and a car comes in, overloaded with dwarfs.

The cycle of the pastor carrying Matthew in the front seat and the jeep from town confront each other from opposite directions. In distant horizon a piece of cloth is flown and the two wrestlers run to the destination, the soil.

Without a single dialogue, the statement is made. Corruption comes from the town almost in a Hardy-esque pattern and destroys the simplicity of nature. Village women are allured. Nothing remains pristine except nature.

The church remains a distant building, metaphorical throughout.

Poverty is dominant among the people who attend the church. As the pastor speaks with eloquence, men leave the mass one by one to consume food provided outside. The pastor speaks on sin and righteousness, on mercy and the four old men keep on talking about no work for three months, helplessness and the desire to go to America. Later in *Kalpurush*, America was a major symbol, but *Uttara* bears the seed. America, for the old men is a place where there will be food and job as all are Christians.

Casual dialogues achieve a surrealistic height as the panoramic landscape keeps changing.... sometimes nature, often the group of folksingers or the old men.

The gateman and the signalman exercise, they have muscles and Dasgupta brings out the grossness of their physicality as well as the primitive instinct, sexuality. The touch of soil is compared to the body of a woman and loneliness is talked about. The gateman talked to the rail line when he was stationed in a distant remote place. But the inevitability of human separation is also there as Nimai says that he and Balaram are like the rail lines. They run together without knowing each other. Knowing each other is a quest that humans tend to forget. The film denotes a time when telephones were ‘talking machines’ to commoners but the quest for human understanding is a timeless one...unfulfilled.



‘Someday you will also get a letter’ – says Balaram to Nimai. Letter means human communication which, in the film turns to marriage. The cow and calf in Nimai’s aunt’s place is focussed and the camera shifts to *Uttara*, whose premarital and post-marital status is conjoined by the red letterbox. She seems to be picture perfect in red sari, white crown holding the letterbox against the vast greenness, but the picturesque is broken as she speaks. She tries to listen to the sound of the letters. She is different. She is nature in her pristine innocence.

The town hooligans are in search of small hotels, nectar and girls who are hungry and need something to eat. Nothing is abstract in the film, a kind of lyrical linearity is maintained. The jeep merges in darkness and the wrestlers wrestle in the

mist. That they could have fought with corruption is never said but felt. The film incites feelings of dismay, anger, hatred and love in the viewers.

As Uttara walks into the frame, the sound of anklets can be heard, the bus stops as tyre is punctured, passengers get down. When wheels fail, man has to walk. Against the mechanical movement of the jeep, car and bus, the folk singers and the dwarfs walk. Walking is basic, naturally rhythmical. The village fair is another visual delight with earthen pots are in focus, bamboo sticks are gathered and the couple coming in the frame, pose in front of a professional photographer and the photo comes in black and white, indicating a superb sense of time lapse.

As Uttara walks in, the sound of her anklets can be heard. Balaram finds the sound harsh. The village woman adjusts her clothes as the customer shifts his eyes to Uttara, gathering wood. There is not a single extra word but the act of throwing money conveys flesh trade invading the village. The scene shifts to Nimai standing on the right and Balaram coming up with Uttara from the left. Uttara is introduced not as a woman but as a wife. Camera shifts as Uttara smiling is focussed on the left and the two men, on her right.



Sexual jealousy creeps in as Balaram shows their rooms to Uttara.

‘We slept here’ – Uttara giggles.

The montages proceed in lyrical sensitivity... the couple... Uttara cooking... the folk team dancing and singing... Balaram in the window and the window closed by Balaram... the sound of sexual ecstasy behind the doors being listened by a jealous and

agonized Nimai... the dwarfs against the landscape and the overloaded car.

Uttara helps the pastor to get up as he loses the balance of his cycle while confronting the violent car and the dwarf holds the cycle for him. The three sensitive humans smile at one another and offer help, the final and basic human gesture is found in the dwarf picking up the bundle of woods for Uttara.

If taken the mythical names, Nimai and Balaram stand for exactly their opposites of the mythical figures. Neither is Nimai the epitome of love, nor is Balaram the upholder of purity.

Uttara, the wife of Abhimanyu, who carried the child of the Pandavas is the village belle who says to Nimai, Are we just naked bodies? Nothing else?

Myth is subverted while nature, folksongs remain unchanged.

Lovemaking satisfies Balaram but Uttara remains unsatiated... ‘You cannot fly with one wing. Body is one. Where is the wing of mind?’

As Nimai also desires Uttara, she retorts, ‘You want me or my body?’

She talks about the difference of body and mind, their relationship and gap, she observes the village wife being sexually exploited by the hooligans.

Four men are in touch with Uttara. Balaram is the passionate and possessive husband whereas Nimai is the jealous observer and desirer, who suffers from sense of deprivation. Uttara has a pure human relation with the Pastor and the dwarf... selfless, generous, warm and friendly. When they occasionally meet on the village path, they exchange warm greetings, not just formal words. Matthew invites her to come to his place. Uttara shows the mirror that she has bought from the fair.

But Uttara fails to be a mirror for the men who chase her as husband, or lover or rapists.

Trees stand still. Leaves continue to shed. A serpent like pathway and a passing serpent indicates impending danger.

The priest being attacked and burnt to death is certainly an act of fanaticism which is hardly talked about but always eerily present in the film and Uttara’s earnest effort to save him is the climax from

where the film takes various turns. Interestingly Matthew who is being chased by one of the murderers gets saved by the elephant trunked tree around which the folk-team continues to dance and sing. They become the saviour of Matthew and as symbolic movement the event achieves a height.

This film has a very much Thomas Hardy-esque temperament, the possibilities of saving civilization by folk culture and by the dwarfs. Rejection of toxic masculinity by Uttara are the final subtle, strong and pure message.

'I hate them so much' – cries Uttara as the wrestlers do not pay attention to her cry to save the pastor who talked about love, language of the trees and birds.



'Will you go with me? Other side of the hill, across the river. Our children will be as good as you. In my village all are dwarfs. We have seen enough of tall people. They only fight. They cannot change the world. In our world all will be dwarfs. World will be ruled by us. Those who do not dream are bullies.'

The end leaves us with a few questions. The dwarf being murdered, Uttara being raped and murdered, the wrestlers being engaged in meaningless fighting, the pastor being burnt to death and Matthew having joined the folksingers, the viewers are petrified by the silent but grotesque violence and tempted to think, how far 'ruling' matters! The dwarf also dreamt about ruling, talked about Uttara as a possible womb for bringing forth better generation. Although Uttara leaves her anklets in the end, and even if she could escape to the land of the dwarfs, how far she could get rid of her biological physicality and find the wing of the mind! The concept of 'wifhood' as suggested by Balaram connoted the body and to the dwarf, she is womb. And 'ruling' remains the ultimate dream, though unfulfilled.

The multi layered film leaves multiple thoughts... there lies possibility and greatness.

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