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Is it Back to the Future for
Bengali Cinema?

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Is it Back to the Future for Bengali Cinema?*

These are interesting times for Bengali cinema.

In June 2014 itself, at least four films worth-watching hit the Kolkata screens: Anjan Dutt's *Shesh Boley Kichhu Nei* (There's No Such Thing as 'The End'), Sandip Ray's *Char* (Four), Shiboprasad Mukherjee and Nandita Ray's *Ramdhanu* (Rainbow), and Birs Dasgupta's *Galpo Holeo Sattiyi* (True Fiction).

That's not all. In the first quarter of 2014, *Jodi Love Dilena Praney* (If There's No Love), *Chander Pahar* (Moon Mountain), *Mishawr Rahasya* (The Egyptian Mystery), and *Jatiswar* (Reincarnation) were simultaneously showing in theatres. One was in its eighth week; another proved the biggest grosser ever in Bengal; the third was right behind it; the fourth was crowned with national awards for its layered treatment of a subject that was so far in the realm of 'jatra-theatre-popular cinema'.

There's more to celebrate. In 2013, 110 films were censored in Kolkata. Surely that's indicative of commercial faith in Bengali cinema? People invest only when they see some prospect of return. And 110 is, doubtless, much higher than the score in the golden years of Bengali films—1950s–60s.

Let's travel down the releases since 2010: Kaushik Ganguly's *Shabdo* (Sound) and *Arekti Premer Galpo* (Just Another Love Story), Indranil Roy Chowdhury's

*Presentation by Ms. Ratnottama Sengupta delivered at the India International Centre on September 19, 2013.

Phoring (Grasshopper), Shiboprasad and Nandita's *Alik Sukh* (Fleeting Happiness), *Ichhe* (Desire) and *Muktodhara* (Liberation), Atanu Ghosh's *Roopkatha Noy* (Not a Fairy Tale), Suman Ghosh's *Nobel Chor* (The Nobel Thief), Anik Dutta's *Bhooter Bhabishyat* (Future of the Ghosts), Somnath Gupta's *Aami Adu* (Yours, Adu), Sekhar Das' *Necklace*, Gaurav Pandey's *Shukno Lanka* (Red Chilly), Bappaditya Bandopadhyay's *Kagajer Bou* (Paper Wife), Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury's *Aparajita Tumi* (Invincible, You), Q's *Gandu*, Srijit Mukherjee's *Autograph*, Rituparno Ghosh's *Abahoman* (The Eternal), Goutam Ghose's *Moner Manush* (The Quest).... Most of these films were noticed because of the new subject, the issues they raised, their treatment, their social impact, and so on.

Talking of social impact: *Arekti Premer Galpo* was the first to address the treatment of alternate sexuality. Yes, others have treated same sex love, but this film changed the way many of us look at the third sex. As for other forms of impact: *Bhooter Bhabishyat* (Future of the Ghosts) was remade in Hindi, putting the clock back by decades—and without being snooty, one can say the Bengali version was superior to the Hindi version, *Gangs of Ghost*. In fact, once more it is prestigious to come to Kolkata, either to shoot, or to produce or simply write a film. Would we otherwise have Shoojit Sircar, Sujoy Ghosh, Neeraj Pandey and Aditya Chopra flying in and out of Netaji Subhash Airport?

Thumbing their nose at naysayers, channels are dedicating themselves to Bengali films. Music channels are thriving on film songs. The brand association is higher than ever—with steel and cement companies, jewelery houses, hospitality partners all in the fray because of the prestige, visibility and financial returns. Last year, Reliance produced four Bengali films—Srijit's *Jatiswar* (Reincarnation), Anjan Dutt's *Ganesh Talkies*, Aniket Chattopadhyay's *Kaapurush Mahapurush* (The Coward Saint), Baba Yadav's *Boss*. Not without reason, one can say, knowing their astute business sense.

Today alternate cinema has become the mainstream—providing employment to technicians, electricians, make-up men, costume department, art department, spot boys, poster printers, and others. Editing units are mushrooming, music

studios are flourishing. If Debajyoti Mishra enjoys national—even international—renown, all thanks go to Bengali films. They're being seen in Singapore, the UK and USA. And why just being screened? *Piyali's Password* (Piyali's Password) was made in the US, with professional actors from Bengal. Had the director lived on, this may have become a trend!

If any further stamp was needed to tom-tom the resurgence in Bengali cinema, it came in March, when *Filmfare East* was launched to laud the good work in the land of Ray—Sen—Ghatak.

What does Bengali cinema need most at this very interesting point in its story? It needs people to notice that Bengali films, though rooted in their geography, are universal in their appeal. That was the characteristic of the films made by Satyajit Ray. That was also the characteristic of films by the next generation, culminating in the oeuvre of Rituparno Ghosh. And, with very interesting departures resulting from their individuality and originality of content, that is also the high point of the films by Kaushik Ganguly, Srijit Mukherjee, Kamaleswar, Sekhar Das, Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury, Bappaditya Bandopadhyay, Suman Ghosh, Atanu Ghosh, Arindam Sil, Anik Dutta, Indranil Roy Chowdhury, Shiboprasad Mukherjee and Nandita Ray, Sudeshna Roy and Abhijit Guha, Mainak Bhaumik, Aditi Roy...

Positive Features

As I said, this is an exciting time for someone like this writer who has lived in cinema, grown up in cinema and seen cinema for more than half a century. I was born into a film family in the year *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Road) was made. The same year *Devdas* was made, and my father (Nabendu Ghosh) happened to be its scriptwriter. So it is a half century of classic cinema that I have grown up with. Cinema is something we breathe in and breathe out; it is not for speaking from a podium, nor is it 'time-pass'.

It was so in the 1980s—'Oh what fun, you don't have to think in Indian films!'—people would say, and typically they meant Hindi films from Bombay. But growing

up there in the 1960s, when there was no television and film songs played from the radio, when film-going was not common and we learnt of new releases through hoardings, we still had heard of Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak and of course Uttam-Suchitra, Soumitra Chatterjee, Chhabi Biswas.... I mean to say, even in Bombay, which mainly produced *masala* films, these names were known not only within the filmmaking fraternity but wherever the art of cinema was discussed.

This continued to be the reality even when Satyajit Ray had ceased to make films, Ritwik Ghatak had ceased to be, and Mrinal Sen too had ceased to be active. But wherever I go, the words 'Bengali cinema' prompt the mention of these three names. This is a great thing to have happened. If these names had not happened, we wouldn't have subsequent filmmakers like Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Goutam Ghose, Aparna Sen, Rituparno Ghosh. More importantly, and by their own admission, we would not have had names like Shyam Benegal, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G. Aravindan among others. I have heard from them that in their filmmaking they were largely inspired by Satyajit Ray. Some like Kumar Shahani idolised Ghatak, while Sen has been a learning point for Syed Mirza and Girish Kasaravalli.

But at that point, apart from these three giants, several others were making films that were relevant, international although rooted in Bengali culture. Sadly, people outside Bengal don't know about them, although many of their films have become national hits or brought home international awards. Tapan Sinha made *Sagina* (Sagina Mahato), *Aadmi Aur Aurat* (Man and Woman), *Ek Doctor Ki Maut* (Death of a Doctor). Ajay Kar made *Saat Paake Bandha* (The Marriage Vows) which won Suchitra Sen an international award at Moscow and was remade as *Kora Kagaz*. Asit Sen remade his own hits *Deep Jele Jai* (Keep the Flame Alive), *Chalachal* (Way of the World) and *Uttar Phalguni* (Late Spring) as *Khamoshi*, *Safar* and *Mamta*. These became classics but few know them as major Bengali directors. Which means there was a climate where others too were making relevant, contemporary, vibrant, international films.

The same climate obtains now once more. Once again we encounter new names. Several directors are making their fourth or fifth film and not disappearing after a promising start. Once again, new producers are coming in, we see new faces on the screen, and once more commercial cinema is talking intelligent content with intelligible mounting. They are not rehashing stereotypes, not regurgitating formulas, not showing disrespect for the intelligence of their audience. Even remakes and adapted scripts are coming up with rooted characters.

Last year I screened a selection of films by some of these directors at the India International Centre, New Delhi. These included *Autograph*, *Alik Sukh* (Fleeting Happiness), *Aami Adu* (Yours, Adu), *Angshumaner Chhabi* (Angshuman's Film), *Abarto* (The Vortex), *Nobel Chor* (The Nobel Thief), *Abasheshey* (Finally) and *Shabdo* (Sound). Sil's *Abarto* uses Ray's *Seemabaddha* (Company Ltd.) as its springboard but isn't a remake or sequel. The debut film was a tribute to Satyajit Ray in the 100th year of Indian cinema. Likewise *Autograph*, which launched Srijit in filmmaking, took off from *Nayak* (The Hero). Set in contemporary times with contemporary characters, both the films revisited Ray's moral issues to comment on today's moral dilemmas.

Nobel Chor, obviously a fictional situation, pivots on the medallion thief: a man finds the Nobel medallion that vanished into thin air, and is advised to hand it over to the chief minister of the state. As he tries to do so, what happens to him in the nation that has for its anthem one of the bard's poems? The film, especially in the 100th year of the first Nobel coming to Asia, was a beautiful look at both the respect for Tagore, and where we stand as a people. Director Suman Ghosh had earlier directed *Padokkhep* (Strides) that won Soumitra Chatterjee his National Award.

To give an idea of the delightfully giddy state Tollygunge is going through, let's look at the most successful production house, Shri Venkatesh Films. Yes, they are adapting Tamil/Telugu hits, but they are also making highly original films. They supported Rituparno Ghosh when he made a big budget *Chokher Bali* (Speck in the Eye) with Aishwarya Rai. At that point in time, when Bengali films were

made for ₹20 to 25 lakh, ₹1 crore was a major jump. That it could happen in Bengal was a turning point. These same mainstream producers who were promoting actor Dev in Raj Chakraborty films produced Aparna Sen's *Iti Mrinalini*; they gave us new directors like Srijit Mukherjee, Kaushik Ganguly, Kamaleswar, Birsa Dasgupta—all of whom are dealing out highly original scripts and hitting the bull's eye with films like *Autograph*, *Baishe Shraavan* (22nd of Shraavan), *Jatiswar* (Reincarnation), *Apur Panchali* (Apu's Song), *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Cloud Covered Star), *Chander Pahar* (Moon Mountain), *Abhishapto Nighty* (The Accursed Nighty).

Now what has this done? This has made the mainstream more classy, but the class cinema has also made an effort to reach out to every person. The word I'm avoiding is 'masses'—there is no kind of looking down. The audience is a nameless audience, not a certain class nor an educational qualification—nor is it a certain language except that of cinema. Well, they are using Bengali but at a point in time when even Hollywood is dubbing films in Tamil–Telugu–Hindi, it really doesn't matter what language the characters are speaking. Whether the characters, the situations and the issues they are living through are identifiable—that is the core issue today, be it in Hollywood or Bollywood, as we see with the new names from Bombay. And it is happening in Kolkata. But people outside Bengal haven't woken up to this.

Sensible content sensitively projected has virtually become the norm in mainstream Bollywood which has given us *Munnabhai*, *Taare Zameen Par*, Anurag Kashyap, Dibakar Banerjee, Shoojit Sircar (*Vicky Donor*), Sujoy Ghosh (*Kahaani*), Neeraj Pandey (*A Wednesday*), Sudhir Mishra... These aren't mere potboilers; they are using technology seductively, to create a new energy that is becoming their stepping stone to world cinema. They are coming up with *Gangs of Wasseypur*, *Peepili Live* and *Ship of Theseus*. Bengal has yet to make an equivalent to these but they're closing in and even bettering in another area. Bollywood took off from newspaper headlines, to make a *No One Killed Jessica Lal* that wasn't arty. The same happened with *Proloy* (Doomsday/*Qayamat*). It was a film about Barun Biswas, a heroic youth *The Times of India* (Kolkata) dedicated a full page to. In 2000, this school teacher co-founded the forum, *Sutia Gonodhorshon*

Pratibad Mancha to protest against a local criminal gang that used gang-rape to terrorise people. Led by the brother of an elected MLA, they would barge into people's houses and rape women—elderly women in the kitchen, young women in front of their father. Barun, born in 1972, was murdered in 2012. But his fight became a movement. However, the commercial angle in the 2013 film came in here. Barun got killed in the first half, and the second half was given over to a policeman who looked the other way when another mysterious character took revenge. So here on it became Rowdy Rathore meets *Dabangg* meets god-knows-what. But note that even the mainstream is using real life incidents and characters, not taking leave of reality.

Debaditya Bandopadhyay's *8.08 er Bonga Local* (Bonga Local of 8.08), too, took off from the murder of a youth protesting the eve teasing of his sister by goons. The same happened with Haranath Chakraborty's *Chalo Paltai* (Let's Change), that took off from an incident involving an enraged father who hit his son who shone in tennis rather than in the school curriculum. In reality, the son had died, but in the film he goes into a coma and the father speaks for understanding the need for real education rather than formal degrees. That's an idealised situation but again it took off from a real life problem and talked about a real issue, albeit with all the melodrama in place.

Even remakes like *Dui Prithibi* (Two Worlds) or *Chirodini Tumi Je Aamar 2* (Forever You Are Mine 2) are not getting bogged down by stereotypes. Super-successful director Raj Chakraborty takes *Motorcycle Diaries*, melts in Telugu formulas, and crafts situations and emotions a lay person can identify with. He turns around a Tamil hit into a *Bojhena Se Bojhena*, developed around a bus accident that changes the lives of three sets of characters, triggering thoughts about accidents per se. Soumik Chatterjee's *Chirodini 2* likewise peeped into the lives of domestic help and showed them as people with grit.

With *Ichhe* (Desire), *Muktodhara* (Liberation), *Accident*, *Alik Sukh* (Fleeting Happiness) and now *Ramdhanu* (Rainbow) Shiboprasad and Nandita have made it their forte to build upon reality—be it of the education system, jail reforms,

accidents, or medical ethics. *Alik Sukh* had put medical practitioners in the dock for neglecting the ideals of the Hippocratic Oath. *Ramdhanu* processes school admission for pre-KG kids to say, best education, not best school, should be our aim. It's heartening that such subjects are not only being taken up but claiming a good turn-out. *Ramdhanu* is in its sixth week today (July 11, 2014).

Taking up issues from real life, one big change that has come over Bengali cinema is that it does not rely on literature as it once did. Rituparno drew a lot from Tagore and his first major triumph, *Dahan* (Trial by Fire), was based on a Suchitra Bhattacharya story. This novelist has given us several films with very strong content. *Ice* and *Alik Sukh* were based on her writings. At one point of time, Sunil Gangopadhyay and Shankar provided content for directors like Satyajit Ray and Goutam Ghose. Like Ray, Sinha too always mined his scripts from literature. Shirsendu Mukherjee and Samaresh Majumdar too have written for films. But few directors now want to go to literature. Yes, Q makes a *Tasher Desh* from Tagore, but that was a strategy. Nobody had seen Q's *Gandu* in Kolkata—it went to festivals, was talked about, but not censored and released. He didn't take it to the CBFC, so no one knows whether it would have been banned. But that itself became a talking point, and rebellion became Q's calling card. Then he directed Tagore's song of rebellion, *Tasher Desh*, and NFDC produced it! The visually beautiful film was an experiment in pure cinema. Experiments are important in redefining any art form, so it is heartening that Bengal's directors haven't given up that.

Certain trends—satire, for one—seem to be on the rise. The phenomenal popularity of *Bhooter Bhabishyat* is well-known. Anik Dutta's film was about a dilapidated house that realty players are waiting to raze. That's bad news for the ghosts inhabiting the house—where will they go now? So they militate to save the property! The satire lights up the reality of disappearing heritage buildings. Anik followed it up with *Ascharjo Pradip*, a contemporanised version of Alladin's tale, to shine the torch on New Age consumerism. Birsa Dasgupta's *Abhishapto Nighty* was another raunchy comedy that cocked a snook at overt Tagoreana even as it laughed at suppressed sexuality.

Strong women characters is another feature of New Bengali cinema. We find strong women turning the events even in mainstream films, and even when they are secondary characters. In *Abarto*, the two main protagonists are male but it is the wife who is morally superior and the strongest character. Likewise, Atanu's *Roopkatha Noy* (Not a Fairy Tale) broke stereotypes with a girl as a petrol pump attendant—not a lawyer, doctor, nurse, IT sector worker, not even highly educated but the strongest character, thinking on her feet. In *Khashi Katha* (The Lamb's Tale), Judhajit Sircar showed a Muslim girl from a very conservative family who wants to be and does become a boxer. They are breaking stereotypes to show not pornstar or revenge seeking Kill Bill. And when she does seek revenge, the meek, subdued acid attack victim domestic help in *Chirodini 2* doesn't hesitate to pay back in the same coin.

Another positive development: today Bengali cinema has people like Nothing Beyond Cinema—professionals with the knowledge of filmmaking acting as executive producers. Directors like Srijit Mukherjee and Suman Ghosh are highly educated. Srijit studied at JNU; Arindam Sil is an MBA. Kamaleswar, the director of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Chander Pahar*, is a cardiac surgeon. Mainak Bhaumik did his Master's in the United States. Suman even today lives in the States, teaches economics in a University and makes films on his holidays in India. The newest entrant is Ranjan Ghosh, a physics graduate who gave up life in the merchant navy to make *Hrid Majhare* (Deep in My Heart) an ode to Shakespeare in his 450th year. All this causes an infusion of ideas and gives rise to films that are not hollow but have sound content.

The actors likewise boast a cosmopolitan character. Many heart-throbs, in the mainstream or otherwise, like Dev, Indranil Sengupta and Rahul Bose, were raised in Bombay but have made Kolkata their home. Jeet, a Sindhi, is the screen idol second only to Prosenjit. Such is his aura that the Delhi-born great-grandsons of past master Sushil Majumdar (the director of *Lal Patthar*, among other classics) are crazy to meet him. In post New Theatres years, Bengal only supplied actors to Bombay.

Another distinctive feature that never happened in the times of Ray–Sen–Ghatak–Sinha was the camaraderie of these young directors. Actor Arindam Sil has directed a film, but prior to that he was a full-fledged executive producer—of *Kahaani*, *Nobel Chor*, *Abosheshey*, among others. Atanu Ghosh, with four films behind him, was scriptwriter for Sil’s *Abarto*. Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury produced Aveek Mukherjee’s *Ekti Tarar Khoje* (In Search of a Star), while Shoojit Sircar—who made history with *Vicky Donor*—played executive producer for Aniruddha’s *Aparajita Tumi*. Mainak Bhaumik, after having proved himself as a very good director with *Maach Mishti and More* (Fish, Sweets, and More), *Bedroom* and *Take One*, still edits Kaushik Ganguly’s films. In turn Kaushik—twice winner of the Golden and Silver Peacock for *Arekti Premer Galpo* and *Apur Panchali*—continues to enrich films by his peers with his nuanced performances. The maker of the brilliant *Shabdo* and *Laptop* is such a flawless performer that everyone in Tollygunge wants him in their film. And Sujoy Ghosh, the director of the cult film, *Kahaani*, acted in Rituparno Ghosh’s last film, *Satyanveshi* (The Truth Seeker).

And what’s special about this camaraderie? They are all doing their own stuff. They are not scared of comparison or competition. They are happy to come together because they know they can be successful in their own right and carve out their individual place. So they are happy to pool their creativity and make bigger things happen. In the past we saw a stray Goutam Ghose in Buddhadeb Dasgupta’s *Grihajuddha*, or him being cinematographer for Aparna Sen’s *Mr. & Mrs. Iyer*. But the current cross fertilisation brings a unique dynamism to the Bengali screen.

Negative Features

Does it mean we are back to the glorious days of Bengali cinema? Perhaps not. Let’s try to understand why.

The lull in Bengali cinema of the 1980s could be ascribed to the massive political upheaval of the 1970s. An entire generation took the heat of the Naxalite movement. So, almost all the art forms—music, theatre, literature included—suffered a setback. Merely ‘safe’ cinemas—read, mishmash potboilers—were

cooking in Tollygunge. After Ray–Sen–Sinha–Majumdar, the Bengali film industry was taken over by businessmen who had no grooming in cinema and cared two hoots for aesthetics. Audiences, discerning or pure middle-class youth, kept away from theatres. A theatre run of three to four months became a matter of the past. Mainstream became ‘rural’ cinema. People forgot that a *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* was equally enjoyed by the rural masses! But times had changed. So the more educated or aware directors started making telefilms.

For a while, Doordarshan was making films. It doesn’t anymore—and that’s a tragedy since DD had made it possible for Goutam Ghose to make *Kaalbela*, a record of the Naxalite years when a generation was sacrificed at the altar of ideology. Another channel, Mahua, made films, as did Tara (*Takhan Teish/At 23*). Sadly, these platforms proved short-lived. They served Tollygunge like a lab or a greenhouse, supplying talent in camera, editing, music, acting, direction. The channels going into reality shows were bad news all the way for cinema. Fortunately, Bengal still has a vibrant theatre, and that is still supplying talent. But theatre doesn’t train people for the camera—television did. Further, reality shows, chat shows, culinary shows, news breaks don’t create viewers for cinema.

Although good cinema made for the big screen is ideally viewed in a darkened auditorium where you forget who you are, television did garner a national viewership for Aravindan and Adoor when we were kids, as did Basu Chatterjee, Amol Palekar, Syed Mirza, Girish Kasaravalli, Jahnu Barua. They became household names, thanks to the idiot box that showed one language film every Sunday. Besides, in the satellite age, internationally we rely on television. So that slot being sacrificed to commerce hurts, as does the channels closing.

The biggest problem is the dearth of theatres. They’re closing, closing, decaying if not giving way to malls. Upgradation is a word that doesn’t exist in the dictionary of local governments, corporations, distributors, exhibitors, audiences. Even one cinema showing language cinemas on a weekly basis would go a long way in taking our films to the world. When I was growing up in Bombay, Chitra Cinema in Dadar used to screen one Bengali movie every Sunday—and that’s how we

kept abreast of the Uttam–Suchitras, the Soumitra–Aparnas, the Ajay Kar–Asit Sens besides Ray–Sen–Ghataks. There also used to be something called Daily Change: a theatre showing the different films of, say, Raj Kapoor, Guru Dutt, Mehboob, Bimal Roy or V. Shantaram. One feature—an actor, a production house, a director—unified the seven different films shown over the week. It was an informal film festival that introduced me to classic Bollywood, even before I set foot in FTII. Today, when all that is gone, as have the film societies, shouldn't we look at schools and institutions, if not to take up cinema as a subject, to at least screen one award winner every month? That will build viewers for tomorrow.

Today, Bengal does have some digitally equipped theatres to show digitally made films but there aren't enough of them. And with theatres closing, Bengali cinema is losing out on audiences in Bengal because there aren't too many investors, and investment is made only by one set of people who come into cinema only for the buzz of money. They don't care to pump money in constructing theatres—and those who've set up multiplexes own the chains. So, even in Mumbai they're facing the problems of monopoly releases, what to talk of Bengal. Even the most anticipated Bengali film is slotted at 11 a.m. or 9 p.m. At that hour, the young viewer would be in bed if not in their classes. Again, even in Delhi, only a limited section of the well-off will drive back after 10 p.m. because public transport back to Gurgaon or Noida is scarce. So how do we fight the monopoly chains?

However, more than the exhibitors it's the distributors who need to pull up their socks. Here's why. A Bengali art house film costs about ₹1–1.5 crore while mainstream commercial films spend about ₹4–5 crore. A film like *Kahaani* doesn't happen every other day. It was completed in ₹6.7 crore and did a business of ₹100 crore or more! But before we gloat over it, let's remember that *Chennai Express* grossed ₹226.50 crore; *Yeh Jawaani Hai Diwani* ₹179.62 crore, *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* ₹108 crore. And these figures show what the magic of distribution does to cinema. Bollywood has cracked this formula—Bengal hasn't, despite Bengali being the fifth most-spoken language in the world.

And it sounds good to hear that Bengali is the fifth most-spoken language; but Bengali films are not shown in Bangladesh, the only other Bengali-speaking nation. Why? Because the Indian government will send 'Indian' films, which means if we get ten Bangla films we will send a package that will include Marathi, Malayalam, Tamil, Hindi, English, Assamese and others too. But Bangladesh doesn't want that. It doesn't want Hindi films to begin with because they're afraid of being swamped—already their youngsters are bowing before Shahrukh, Salman and Aamir Khans. Besides, they are not interested in Marathi, Malayalam or other language films—they want to see Bengali or nothing. How do we resolve this impasse?

Bengali cinema loses out on another count too. When *Alik Sukh* was released in Delhi–Bombay–Bangalore, it was publicised only as a 'Bengali film', restricting its viewership to Bengali-speakers alone. In other words, only Chittaranjan Park residents in Delhi were expected to flock to its screening. But when a Hollywood film is released, do we say only St. Stephens or Miranda House students will see it? A Hindi release is surely not directed only at the north Indian language belt. Why this mindset for language cinema, then? Today Hollywood dubs its products. They have the money, they can dub it for Latin American, European, African, Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Iranian, Afghan viewers. We can't, we only subtitle them. But worldwide cinema is seen through subtitles. So why do we not look at these as contemporary world cinema?


What inhibited this perhaps was the mindset that 'Bengali cinema is politically oriented'. Yes, there were directors like Mrinal Sen who were seen as political filmmakers. Younger directors like Ashoke Viswanathan and Sekhar Das also made political films. Sekhar started with a very strong political vision but of late he is saying: 'Having done films with a strong political accent, I now want to focus on pure cinema. I don't see why I need to carry the baggage of always using my movies to make political comments.' Politics is not something outside our life—even a rape is a political issue today. So politics is not pulpit cinema and we are waking up to it everyday.

Regrettably, among the acres Bengali cinema has lost are the festivals abroad. Let alone the USA, France or Germany, Bengali films are not screened even in the UK or Japan. Cannes, Berlin or Venice—once the bastion of the Bengal maestros—doesn't care to know what Kolkata is thinking today. In Tokyo last year, the organisers were boasting that they always project Asian cinema, but Indian cinema hasn't featured in their festival after Chinese, Korean and Iranian cinema. Where are we losing out? Forget the Big Five (Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Toronto, Montreal), why are Shanghai and Sri Lanka the best we seem to be doing? And we rest content when an *Aami Adu* emerges the best at the SAARC Festival!

Today Bengali films are nuanced, the characters are pulsating, they are rooted in realities that make breaking news. The situations are detailed to make the images convincing, yet the films are not complex. They are not gimmicky, not intellectual like they were at one point of time, not mystifying. They're talking to viewers, communicating. They're made on modest budgets with limited experiments in technological terms, but with dollops of conviction. So average viewers also relate to them. And success is no longer measured only by overflows. It is measured by thematic novelty and effective presentation. That is where the directors are scoring.

What we need to figure out now is how to reach the world.

Ratnottama Sengupta, a very senior journalist, has been writing for newspapers and journals, participating in discussions on the electronic media; teaching mass communication students, writing books on cinema and art, programming film festivals and curating art exhibitions. Daughter of Nabendu Ghosh, a leading name in Bengali literature and legendary screen playwright-director, she has written on Hindi films for the Encyclopedia Britannica; been a member of CBFC, served on the National Film Awards jury and has herself won a National award. Currently the Arts Editor of *The Times of India*, she is also a member of NFDC's script committee.



The India International Centre was founded with a vision for India, and its place in the world: to initiate dialogue in a new climate of amity, understanding and the sharing of human values. It is a non-government institution, designed, in the words of its founder president, Dr. C.D. Deshmukh, to be a place where various currents of intellectual, political and economic thought could meet freely. 'In its objectives, the Centre declares its purpose as being that of society to 'promote understanding and amity between the different communities of the world by undertaking or supporting the study of their past and present cultures, by disseminating or exchanging knowledge thereof, and by providing such other facilities as would lead to their universal appreciation.'

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