

CHOKH GYALO

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Based on a Tarashankar bandyopadhyay story, Nandikar's "Chokh Gyalo" (95 mins, Bengali) is directed by Goutam Halder. On the projected backdrop image, a pair of eyes peer into the barren fields, lit by the rising sun or sunset's last glow. Voice-over narration and songs describe the village, 'Chatiphathar Math' in Birbhum. There is famine, no water, no green leaves on trees ; and the river is dry. Under the dry parchments of a mango grove, which becomes a makeshift hut, Surodhuni (Swatilekha Sen Gupta), an old woman has been living for forty years. Growing up as an orphan, Surodhuni has been condemned as a witch, by the village folk. Weaving a gold crown on her forehead, the witch picks up a stick with shaking hands and limbs. She begs from house to house, with a bowl and stick. She returns to the hut with rice and oil. Speaking to the audience, she discloses that she loves loneliness, and dislikes human beings. Looking at a hand mirror, she feels that reflections have become all dark. To the accompaniment of drum beats, a voice-over describes faces. The witch feels that whatever happens is never understood, and remembers the olden days.

When she was about eleven years old, Surodhuni was flogged by the brahmin landlord Shanu Chowdhury, on the steps of the river bank, for stealing mangoes. The voice-over brings out the landlord's shouts and the screams and curses of the landlord's wife. The witch prays to God to improve vision, or make her blind. As she begs for alms, a lady of a house forbids her entry. The witch smells fried fish. She speaks some times in blank verse, with shrill tone intonations. She uses a broom to clear the surroundings of the hut. Memories are fortified by the voice-over narrations. Some years ago to the accompaniment of strong winds and storms, a young village girl Savitri (Antara Banerjee) carrying a baby in arms, had come to witch's hut. The girl's mother was ill and she had lost her way. The witch offers water and food to the girl, and recites and sings to the baby. But Savitri feels uncanny and runs away with the baby. The witch has nightmares that she was chewing up the baby. She prays for hundred years of life to Savitri's son. Soon the witch vomits blood, and Savitri's son dies after abnormal perspiration. The witch eats from an earthen bowl, but there is scarcely any hunger.

Putting on a decorated veil, the witch recalls her youth. She remembers her reflection in a mirror in a panwalla shop. A young girl (Sumona Mukherjee), who has run away from her parents' home, dances and frolics with a village man. The girl belongs to the low caste dom community, and the man works in a factory. As the witch gazes at the moon, the past unfolds. The girl and the man appear in dark silhouettes. The man opposes marriage, and the girl leaves when the man fails to produce money. The witch has a premonition that the man will hang himself, as she pulls out silver jewellery and meagre cash from a small cloth bag. The man screams and flees. The witch throws a bone at the man, who dies bleeding. The witch packs up her frugal belongings and leaves the hut. As she walks, her body shakes with the wind, amid the projected lightning and thunder

on the backdrop screen. On the dark stage, the witch lies dying on the fields, drained of blood. The eyes peer once again from the projected image.

The stark and sparse set, conveying drought and poverty, is dense with narrative, making it fascinating to explore even when empty. The audio recordings come alive, with the background still projections. Surodhuni, the impoverished witch, creates her own narrative with intertwined story lines, developing concurrently in the present. Swatilekha Sengupta plays not only what Surodhuni feels about herself, but what she feels about Surodhuni. "Chokh Gyalo" brings out the dark background, in the searching, ruthless story. Gautam Halder's direction has deep feeling and great clarity. The other actors, besides Surodhuni, have to cope up with in-the-round acting, as they face away from the audience, most of the time. Their words remain indistinguishable, as they are drowned by the off stage narrative and play reading, rendered loudly by speakers. The off stage narration and songs, by Swatilekha Sengupta, Goutam Halder, and others, also interferes in Surodhuni's address to the audience. □□□