

Calcutta Notebook

Shoummo

*Lastly, silence:
I believe, this is the most symbolic....*

(Ritwik Ghatak on sound in films)

KOLKATA WAS ALWAYS well known for its discourse on cinema facilitated in no small way by film clubs or film societies. The activity levels of these clubs have ebbed of late and the reasons could be many. Digital technology has empowered film lovers to enjoy cinema within the confines of their homes along with friends and fellow film buffs. Queuing up outside Sarala Ray Memorial hall, best suited for foreign films with subtitles because of abysmal auditorium acoustics, has been passé for the past ten years in the least. It must be mentioned that at least two film societies, namely Cine Central and Eisenstein Film Club have ridden the digital crest very well and many a time these societies have screened films with the aid of digital gadgets, in better auditoriums.

Kolkata film societies have also been prolific publishers and again, even if the level of activity may have ebbed, there has been an intermittent flow of film society periodicals as well as scripts of notable films and anthology of important articles. One such publication that readily comes to mind is Film Polemics by Cine Club of Calcutta. It is a collection of letters and a few articles that drew attention on the pages of Kolkata newspapers and periodicals between 1958 and 1991. Some of the articles and letters appeared in newspapers and periodicals published from elsewhere like *The Times of India*, *Mainstream* and the now defunct *Illustrated Weekly of India*. This weekly and its predecessor, *Now*, played leading roles in providing space to the *polemic* combatants.

A recent spat between two established but parallel cinema directors on the pages of a city vernacular daily tickled memories of the aforesaid publication. Most of these Film Polemics were between cineastes who pitched in for or against a recently released film or its maker. At times the film makers joined the fray and I will restrict myself only to exchanges between film makers and then meander down to the current spat.

'The Statesman' on 10 August 1965 carried a letter by Satyajit Ray on a recent film *Akash Kusum* by Mrinal Sen and the polemics in this case began on 23 July 1965 when a review of the film appeared in *The Statesman*. Satyajit Ray suo motu participated in the debate. He commented on the topicality of the film by writing that '...the topicality of the theme in question stretches well back into antiquity, when it found expression in that touching fable about the poor deluded crow with fatal weakness for status symbols?' The debate drew responses from the readers of *The Statesman* and a member of the film crew, namely Ashis Barman. Mrinal Sen joined the fray through a letter published on 10 August 1965. He countered the view of Satyajit Ray and then went on to humbly assert that 'To conclude, I do not, by any chance, wish to take refuge under the fable-crow's wings and claim to an Aesop or a Cervantes or Chaplin. I have made a film called *Akash Kusum* and that is all.' A few more letters were exchanged between the main protagonists and in one of them, Ray taking off from Jean Luc Godard's oft repeated quote "A film is a film is a film", commented exasperatedly that '... A crow-film is a crow-film is a crow-film.' While one can sense a trace of acrimony in these exchanges, there were no personal asides. Above all, during the course of the debate, the discussions encompassed Aesop, Cervantes, topicality of themes, Ibsen, Gorky, Oscar Wilde and Hamlet. All of these were discussed within a span of a month and the last in the string of mails is dated 13 September 1965.

That acrimonies were not carried forward, at least not in public, is reflected in Mrinal Sen's letter to *The Statesman* dated 16 May 1966. After a positive review of Satyajit Ray's film *Nayak* in *The Statesman*, Mrinal Sen commented '...and for a discriminating spectator it is a rewarding experience to watch this film and as he does, so he develops a deeper understanding of the circumstances in which the characters live and desire and even despair at times.' Understandably, Satyajit Ray did not participate in this bout of exchanges.

Another major exchange among cineastes and film makers played itself out on the pages of *The Telegraph* in the early nineties. Nearer to the times that we live in, the exchanges were at times laced with arsenic. Critic, film society activist and film maker (*Bilet Pherot*, *Amodini* and some more) Chidananda Dasgupta crossed swords with Satyajit Ray over his film *Shakha Proshakha*. The film was reviewed by Chidananda Dasgupta on 2 June 1991 in *The Telegraph*. The review was appreciative and admitted that the film is a great advance on *Ganashatru*. There were also critical comments like 'For all but the most morally committed of a somewhat older generation, there is a touch of naivete here that tends to make Ray's ethics passed to them.' Or 'The only distressing aspect is the fall in the

quality of physical technique—the lighting, the sets, the details which obviously Ray can no longer supervise with the furious energy and zealous control he used to bring to these elements.’ Satyajit Ray was quick to react and called Chidananda Dasgupta ‘a part time film maker’ and also said that ‘Dasgupta should have known that a foggy shot is not the result of bad lighting but of bad stock or a bad lens.’ He rebutted Chidananda Dasgupta by asserting that ‘...my care for details has remained undiminished in spite of my illness and my advancing years.’

Chidananda Dasgupta responded immediately to comment ‘It is amusing, as well as sad, to see Satyajit Ray out with his fly-swatter once more to squash any (Indian) film critic. To emphasise fall in the quality of visuals in Satyajit Ray’s oeuvre, Chidananda Dasgupta went on to add that ‘It also shows how sadly out of touch he is with the quality of visuals being achieved today by younger Indian directors such as Shaji Karun or Mani Kaul’. That he did not take kindly to Satyajit Ray’s personal attack is apparent in his comment ‘The contrast between the superb quality of *Shakha Proshakha*’s sound recording (achieved by French technicians) and its indifferent visuals, is plentifully obvious to any film critic or film-maker, even part time ones.’ Satyajit Ray did not respond but the exchanges continued on the pages of *The Telegraph* and were joined by Satyajit Ray’s biographer, Andrew Robinson and cineaste, Dhruva Gupta. Nevertheless, the *Shakha Proshakha* debate, though more bitter than the one spurred by *Akash Kusum*, threw up for discussion Dostoyevsky, Bach, Indian New Wave cinema, Rabindranath Tagore, Upanishads, Ibsen and also other films of Satyajit Ray.

We can now focus our attention to the bitter exchanges that broke out on the pages of a local vernacular daily on the morning of 4 June 2011. Film maker Buddhadeb Dasgupta in a no holds barred interview brought into public domain the details of a personal tete-a-tete between him and fellow film maker Rituparno Ghosh. Apparently, Rituparno Ghosh had asked his senior peer to recommend him to persons known to the senior, for the National Film Awards 2011 in the Best Actor category. The former is also reported to have said during the course of the aforesaid discussion that if he does not get the award then the award must not go to Boomba. Boomba is none other than Prosenjit Chatterjee, a screen idol from Tollywood. Rituparno Ghosh hit back hard with a signed article in the same daily on 11 June 2011. He started by regretting his acquaintance with Buddhadeb Dasgupta. Rituparno Ghosh also went to reveal snippets of the same conversation with Buddhadeb Dasgupta. Another Kolkata film maker, Gautam Ghose, was dragged into the mess with Buddhadeb Dasgupta reportedly having said that ‘Gautam has not made anything of note since *Paar*.’ He ended by saying that he is now aware that Buddhadeb Dasgupta can never be worthy of his trust nor his well wisher. The only fallout of this mutual mud throwing is that the muck stuck to both the participants quite well. In deference to earlier Film Polemics, a reference to the literary genre, *Magic Realism*, was used out of context by one of the mud wrestlers. Mercifully, both of them have chosen to remain quiet since then.

If the above is a case of a rot running much deeper than that apparent to this lay observer, much deeper than the staple debate of TMC better than CPI(M) or vice versa, then the writer Asim Roy must be given the credit for having thrown some light with his pithy comment that ‘A negative chuar like attitude has engulfed the mental firmament of West Bengal;’ (*Jibon-Mrityu*, Part II, Asim Roy’s autobiography, *Ebong Jalarka*, December 2008). The reference to chuar is difficult to translate. In 1798-99, the chuar rebellion broke out in Bankura and Midnapore. However, in common bhadralok parlance, chuar is used in a pejorative sense to describe an obstinate person of a different social background with a tendency to disobey, confront and argue with irreverence. The Dasgupta-Ghosh spat had negativity written all over with a general wish of the combatants to be seen as one up on a peer. Did the exchanges generate any heat? Well, that is for the readers to say but there was certainly no light. □□□