

Article

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Bengali Cinema: Hurdles and Challenges



Bengalis thrive on nostalgia. Harping on the “weres” and “have beens” and fantasizing on “those times past” takes up so much time that the present flies by and the quintessential Bengali is seldom prepared for times to come. From being 50 years ahead over the rest of India in the 20th century, Bengalis in India have developed a complacent myopia which has cancerously affected our growth in all spheres, be it intellectual, industrial, cultural or entrepreneurial. This also means that the playground is open for those who want to play irrespective of capabilities. To graduate from the playing field of motleys is like crabs climbing out of a bucket. This state of affairs affects Bengali cinema as well, and by Bengali cinema I mean the Bengali language cinema from the Bengali speaking states of West Bengal and Tripura, and not the country of Bangladesh who have gone ahead of Bengali cinema from India even though the industry is a couple of generations younger than ours.

Has Bengal stopped producing talent? No, there are talented filmmakers of Bengali origin but have largely either lived outside Bengal or chosen to move to better working opportunities outside Bengal and some have made films in other languages, predominantly Hindi or multilingual films. The names of successful directors who top this list are Dibakar Bannerjee (*Khosla ka Ghosla*, *Oye Lucky*, *Lucky Oye*, and *Love, Sex and Dhoka*), Anurag Basu (*Barfi*, *Life in a Metro*), Ayan Mukherjee (*Wake up Sid*), Shoojit Sircar (*Vicky Donor*, *Piku*, *Pink*) and Sujoy Ghosh (*Jhankar Beats*, *Kahani*) and they have made an engaging kind of cinema



with content and form which has generated conversation and emulation. If one looks at other collaborators in the filmmaking process then many more technicians have migrated away from Kolkata in search of meaningful work which pays for survival as well, and Sudeep Chatterjee (cinematographer), Ayananko Bose (cinematographer), Pritish Nandy (producer/media content developer), Neeraj Roy (producer/media content developer), Biswadeep Chatterjee (sound designer), Arun Bose (sound designer) apart from the galaxy of Bengali stars and starlets prefer to be based in Mumbai. More and more talented individuals move away from Kolkata, leaving the local industry drained of new talent to blossom. A brain drain of talented craftsmen cannot be denied, leaving the local industry gasping for fresh breath. Even fresh graduates from the Satyajit Ray Film & Television Institute Kolkata (SRFTI) prefer to touch base in Mumbai or Chennai rather than try for a career in Kolkata because of a coterie or nexus of a few and a hegemonic guild which does not allow competition to build up or challenge the outdated traditional practices prevalent in the Tollygunj film industry.

The industry needs a fresh set of film professionals like producers, publicists, and sales agents along with informed technicians who can strategically think and place, and exploit new and exciting film projects and raise finance for the same. Today SRFTI offers a course in Producing for Film and TV, and graduates of the first batches have been absorbed immediately into the industry in the south, west and north, but the Bengali film industry needs such professionals who can redesign how films are made and how they are presented to audiences and to the market that can be expanded. Coproducing, crowd funding, fund raising exercises or even platforms for film pitches need to be organized with regularity to identify and bring together film talent from all over Bengal and maximize the variety and content and creative craftsmen to revive meaningful cinema. One looks forward to the endeavors of young people like Shapath Das and hope that he will be able to bring in producers, and talent together at events like the Producers Meet 20 which will over time bring back fecundity to Bengali cinema.

It is sad that the production center for Bengali films has largely remained Kolkata and of course though Dhaka has emerged as the more dominant player, only one centre of production controls Bengali Cinema in India. In the Tamil industry, Madurai has challenged the commercial cinema as a production centre, in the Malayalam industry, production is divided between Trivandrum and Cochin, in Maharashtra, Pune and Kolhapur have contributed to Marathi films along with Mumbai. The Hindi film production has also seen the emergence of regional films in Hindi. More production centers need to develop in Bengal and the Bengali speaking regions. It is high time Tripura had a film production center of its own. Darjeeling district, part of Bengal but with a unique identity of its own deserves to have a film production base as well.

Film literacy in Bengal even with its long history has managed to widen the schism between the informed and the lay audiences. The state or the film societies could probably address this issue by taking film and film discourses to village and small town schools on a regular basis. In Kerala a travelling cinema scheme in place over the last 20 years, backed by the state government through the Chalachitra Academy has changed the nature of the audience. The travelling film, weekly undertakes at least two to three screenings in three different colleges and schools or Film societies over the length and breadth of the state taking meaningful local cinema

and international cinema both classics and contemporary to impressionable audiences creating a generation of film viewers who crave films of quality with regularity, thus creating a demand for good cinema. This is apart from the many regional and international film festivals hosted at almost all the main towns in the state.

State Government policy and infrastructural support and funding to the film industry in the last decade have been practically nonexistent in Bengal. Except for Nandan, which has begun screening commercially released Bengali films to keep out of the red, and organizing the Kolkata film festival there is hardly any support to contemporary filmmakers from Bengal. Even the Kolkata International Film Festival has over the years lost its reputation as a serious film festival attracting cineastes and cinema professionals from all over the world. Programmers would at one point of time visit the Kolkata film festival to select Indian films for distribution and exhibition in their countries. Today the festival is failing to promote Bengali cinema forget Indian cinema, effectively through networking with other festivals. The government also needs to have understanding with other state run theatres in other states where Bengali films could be screened.

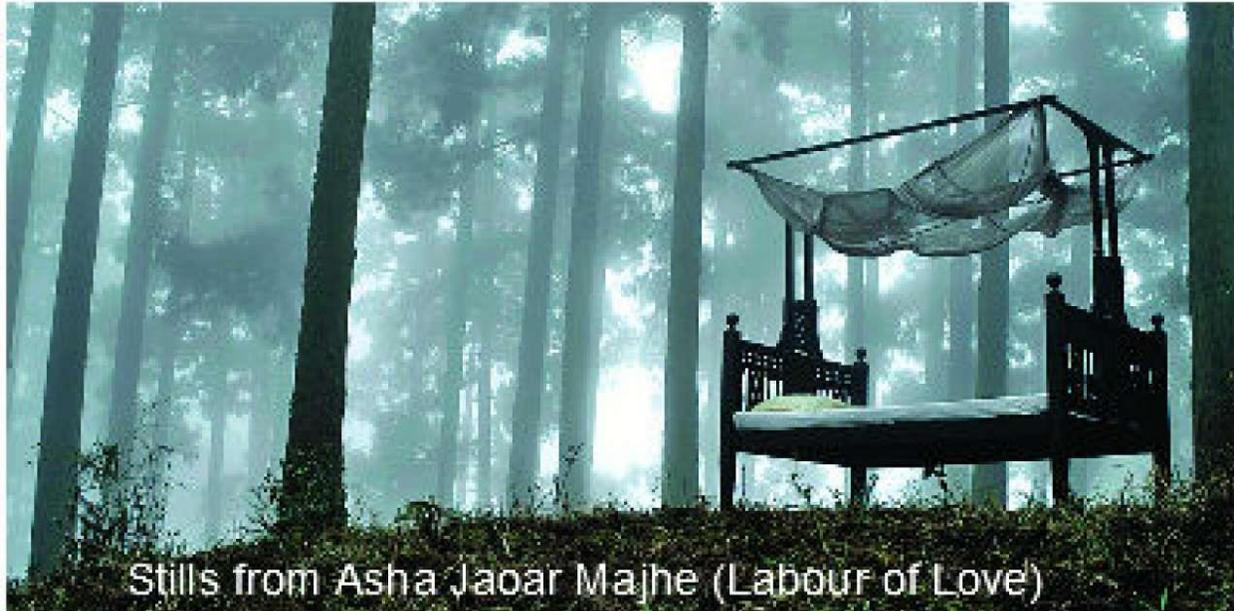
When it comes to the state, promoting art, culture and film, Kerala, Maharashtra, Gujarat and even Jharkhand are eons ahead, and this has translated into high quality of films by new and promising filmmakers. Marathi films today have captured the attention of cineastes completely. Filmmakers like Umesh Kulkarni, Sachin Kundalkar,, Avinash Arun, Nagraj Manjule, Paresh Mokashi, Chaitanya Tamhane, Amey Wagh, Girish Kulkarni, Parna Pethe, Rajesh Mapuskar, Prasad Oak are a few to look out for in the future. Just the wide range of names suggests the impetus that state support can give to reviving the industry. Kerala and Gujarat today can boast of the same story.

The subjects or content needs to be more varied to interest people. Pritha Chakraborty's *Mukherjeedar Bou* is a fresh breather in the Bengal scene. It blends serious content with commercial viability and production value. Most Bengali films are either soft subjects or films which have an idea which has not been developed convincingly and have very poor production value to back it. In short, most films have started to look either tacky or gimmicky. The blending of art and



commercial cinema leading to a palatable and good cinema rather than creating divides between cinema for the intellectuals which never makes profits and cinema for the cheap entertainment which also bombs in most cases is yet to be effective in Bengal. In order to make a powerful social or political satire work in the cinema, a perspective on politics, history, the arts and indeed life is required apart from an understanding of film language and technology. In fact this knowledge is required to make a film in any genre. The apparent apathy towards introspection, engagement and observation amongst the upwardly mobile Bengali middle-class young filmmakers who seem to be content with material success and the power it brings in its wake, leads them to an indifference to realities of modern Bengal, and finds neurotic solace and convenience in alienation. Bengali cinema seems to be a step way from being increasingly drawn away from the real world into the world of virtual reality where everything is simulated and with little verisimilitude. It is a world without a sense of ethics or humanism. It shows apathy towards the joys of life and its surprises. It fails to blend the local art forms and engage their powers to enhance the collaborative art form, or confluence of art forms that cinema is.

Hollywood houses like Columbia TriStar have tried to distribute Bengali movies, but have been defeated by the pathetic production values vis a vis the cost of the film. The work culture is slow and practices of the industry rental houses are oligarchic. True to the nature of the business the box office successes are limited, but that is expected in a system where value for money just does not exist. The highhandedness of the unions has affected producers and yet only a couple has felt it necessary to challenge these practices. If a revival is to be thought of a change in business practices at the production level and better streamlined production and post production workflow is also a necessity. Better infrastructure and more accountability require a concerted effort rather than loose cannonball efforts. It is heartening to see a few organizations like 'Cherrypix' challenging the norms where production workflows and work ethics are concerned. In this context two filmmakers and their work come to mind, Boudhayan Mukherjee and Aditya Vikram Sengupta. While Mukherjee steadily worked his way up through the



Stills from *Asha Jaoar Majhe (Labour of Love)*

advertorial film vineyard, Sengupta had graduated from NID. Both had captivating debut films, in *Teen Kahon* and *Aasha Jaowar Majhe* respectively. Both films caught the attention of the world and then the Bengali audiences warmed up to them. Both managed to make their second films *Violin Player* and *Jonaki* within a short period of time. While Mukherjee's second film was marketed successfully both in India and abroad, Aditya's film had a fantastic festival run in Europe, but did not find a distributor in Bengal. Both films looked extremely international. While Aditya's film failed to connect with local audiences, and the Bengali sensibilities, Boudhayan is in production for his third film.

Another aspect of that probably rung the death knoll of Bengali cinema is screening times. While single screens had the famous noon and matinee shows much favored by householders because of their convenient timings which matched the daily schedules of middleclass life in Bengal, the Multiplexes ushered in timings which favored the younger college crowd. One had morning shows at around 9.00 am for niche cinemas. The timings gave way to 11.00am/ 2.00pm/ 5.00pm/ 8.00pm approximately and somehow this did not suit the housewives whose staple of entertainment which included Bengali films went beyond their reach, and they were weaned to the daily soaps on television easily. The multiplexes also put watching films out of bounds for many who found television a cheaper alternative. However with films streamed directly to the mobile phones, the prospects seem to have looked up for cinemas of all kinds once more.

The cherry on the cake however is that in the documentary genre films from Bengal and Bengali filmmakers have carved out a place for themselves in the world of documentary today. Kolkata is host to a unique program, the *Docedge* over the last decade and more, and this platform has yielded some thought provoking films and launched first time filmmakers in the world of nonfiction. Nilotpal Mazumdar has singlehandedly put back Kolkata and Indian films back into circulation in and outside India. Film makers like Supriyo Sen , Balaka Ghosh, Ranu Ghosh, Bishnudev Halder, Sankhajit Biswas, Pritha Chakraborty and others are just a few of the many who have benefited from platforms like the ones that the Documentary resource initiative have provided. These young and truly independent lion hearts have shown how big films can be made out of modest resources and how opportunities await the filmmaker with an entrepreneurial outlook and a passion to tell stories which need to be told.

Finally as long as humans will survive so will stories and films, and the platforms for distribution are opening up new opportunities daily. However one must remember filmmaking will always remain a niche industry with a small contribution from sales and returns in comparison to other industries and more so for a regional industry with a small captive market. To reach out beyond the boundaries of the market one has to up the values of production and harness one's cultural heritage to make a mark.

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