

Essay

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North Bengal in Cinema



Kanchanjungha

Cinema in 21st century is ore a medium of raising voice than of entertainment. It relates with the common people so easily and interestingly that want to be a part of it knowingly or unknowingly. Indian cinema has a rich history of regional initiatives. The basic concept of making films in local or regional language is to involve the mass of that certain locale, to communicate with them, in their own words and to make them familiar with the problems or situations that they are passing through without knowing that it should be protested. However, making films in regional language has another aspect also, that is to intimidate the world about the lifestyle of those particular region or folks. Documentary, no doubt plays a very important role for doing so, but documentary made by a native or a film on that particular folk's lifestyle makes the whole thing more acceptable.

India, being a country of diversity, we witness a lot of regional film industries here, unlike

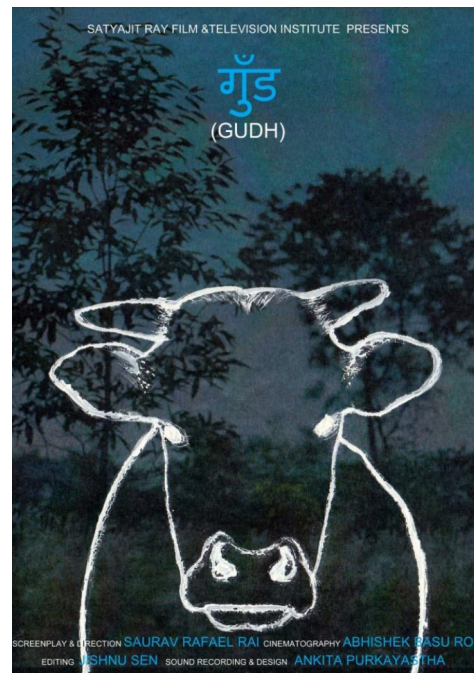
the other countries of the world where mostly one or two film industries represent the whole country. On the contrary India has Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu and a lot more regional film industries which are working well aesthetically as well as economically and most importantly they are entertaining people in their own languages along with representing their cultures, folklores, music to the other parts of the country and to the world. The name I have mentioned above are quite popular as big film industries of India but there are more, we call it 'sub-regional cinema'. Assamese films like *Village Rockstar* by Rima Das or Gujarati film like *The Good Road* by Gyan Correa are instances of these kind of cinema. We need to know and talk more about these cinemas now. So, I will try to say something about the part of Bengali Cinema, which even after a notable effort is not being spoken.

North Bengal, the northern part of West Bengal, is a place in the Himalayan foothills.

It has two divisions, one is Jalpaiguri Division which includes districts like Alipurduar, Coochbehar, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Kalimpong, which are mainly hilly region. On the other hand, the Malda Division has districts of North and south Dinajpur and Malda, mainly plain land. We all know the names of these places as famous tourist spots of Bengal and that made this place a preferable shooting location for Directors seeking scenic beauty. Consequently, people of these parts started working as a guide or assistant to the film makers. Among them some moved to Bollywood or Tollywood seeking film related jobs. Most of them work as technicians or technical assistants in these industries. Famous film makers like Satyajit Ray, Ritwick Ghatak and Tapan Sinha shot their films in North Bengal. Ray not only used the location to shoot his film *Kanchenjunga* but also included the local folks in his works. Who will forget the boy in the last scene descending by road singing a local song. In fact, this film gave birth to another film maker in North Bengal. A native person named Pratap Subbha who has assisted Ray at the time of *Kanchenjunga*, made a Nepali film and it got good audience response in this region and also in Nepal. For this initiative he still receives an amount as a token of respect from Nepal Government. In fact the first ever Nepali film *Satya Harishchandra*, directed by B.D.Pariyar was also been produced from Kolkata in the year 1951.

Similarly, this part of Bengal has a vast variation of Tribes. They all have respective languages, cultures, music and films. Apart from Nepali or Gorkha community there is another big tribe called Rajbangshi. They were the royal army of Koch kingdom. A Rajbangshi scholar cum historian namely Panchanan Verma, who wrote the history of Rajbangshi people, started an initiative of making their local folklore or melodrama but the Kamtapur raising prevented him to film it. Later some anonymous Rajbangshi people had filmed a

very popular folklore *Moynar Chokhkhut Jal* (The Tear of Moyna) using a video recorder but unfortunately it has not been preserved. There are few prints available online and offline but those are not the original film which I am talking about. After that a native Rajbangshi made another film named *Sujan Bandhu* (My Dear Friend) which is also lost in the absence of proper curation. Later, many films have been made in this language from them *Mawyer Anchal* (Veil of Mother) directed by Tikam Sharma and Baiju Sonar released in 2007 has got huge response. According to one of the directors, this film was dubbed in nine languages and all the versions were successful. Another notable name of Rajbangshi cinema is Tapan Roy. He made films namely *Sonar Pinjira* (The Golden Cage) and *Kai Don* (Why Don).



Gudh.

Above mentioned person Baiju Sonar was also a caretaker in Mumbai Film Industry. After returning home he made the abovementioned film. Firstly, he initiated a film in Sadri (another tribal language) but failing to complete the film he moved on to another project that was *Mawer Anchal*. Afterward Sadri films happened but we do not have much information about those films. There is another tribal language called Rava. In this language

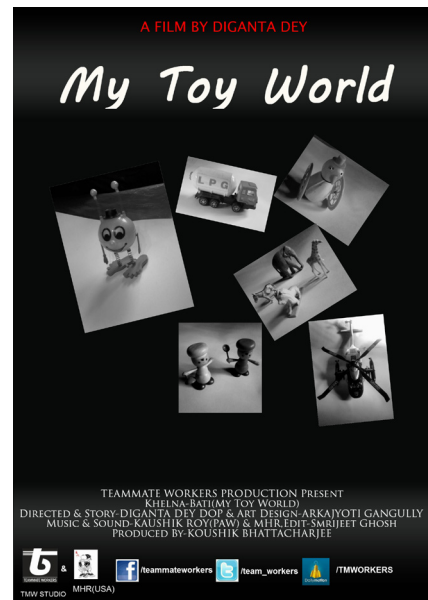
we do not have any notable work other than a documentary made by a bunch of students of mass communication department of North Bengal University titled *Maa* (Mother). Surjapuri is another notable language of North Bengal. It is a mixed version of Bengali and Hindi mostly used in North Dinajpur. So, people who know any one or both the languages take interest in Surjapuri Films. Directors like Kiran Kundu and Shiva Shahani are two notable names in this field. Another tribal language is Mechi but not much information is available on Mechi films. Apart from these we have a documentary made by the students of mass communication department of Siliguri College. The name of the documentary is *Toto Para*. They documented the smallest tribe of India and also one of the smallest Tribe in the world, 'Toto'.



Roadside Scientist

The situation now is getting better day by day. Some young and fresh faces are coming up-front. Though they are not making cinema in aboriginal languages of North Bengal, but they are representing their hometown and their languages. The most notable names among them are Saurav Rai and Diganta Dey. Saurav is a native of North Bengal and completed his studies from Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute with specialization in film direction

and screen writing. His first film is in Nepali language named *Monsoon Rain*. It is a short which was premiered at the 34th International Munich Film Festival 2014. His diploma film *Gudh* (The Nest) got the official selection in the Cinefondation Section in 69th Cannes Film Festival 2016, 34th Tel Aviv Film Festival, Jury prize in IFFLA 2017 and many more. *Nimto* (Invitation) the debut feature of him, shot in his native place called 'Bara Mangwa' was a part of the NFDC Work in Progress lab, where it won 'Prasad DI Award' in 2018. In 2019 it was also the part of Hong Kong Asian Film Financing Forum where it won the 'HAF Goes to Cannes' Award. The film had its international premiere at Rotterdam International Film Festival 2020 in the Bright Future Segment. It also won award in Jio MAMI Film Festival, Mumbai. He is currently developing his sophomore *Anantah* (Eternity), which was recently selected in NFDC Co-production Lab Program 2019. According to Mr. Rai, "Film making in North Bengal as such does not ring a bell." He admits that there is commercial cinema since time immemorial but North Ben-



Toy World

gal lack content ridden cinema, "One which is cinema of necessity and not driven by its commercial aspect."

Another notable name of this field is Diganta

Dey. Born & brought up in Tufanganj, Cooch-behar, Diganta founded an independent film production house at the age of 18 and directed his first short film *The Silent Wheel* when he was 19 only. It got selected in 21st Kolkata International Film Festival. His second film *Khelna Bati* (My Toy World) was the first ever independent chuckimation (experimental stop motion animation) initiative. His 3rd film *Monalisa Feelings* also got awards and nominations in several festivals. His 4th venture is a short documentary on a president award winning scientist of his native place titled *Roadside Scientist*. His recent work *Monsoon Clips* was invited in Platform Busan program of the Busan International Film Festival 2019. Filmmakers like them have become an inspiration to the new generation independent filmmakers from this region. Among them Patadeep Choudhury, Alok Saha, Anirban Ghosh, Pabitra Das are doing notable works.

To conclude, Prof. Samir Chakraborty of North Bengal University, who was also a poet, had founded the Siliguri Film Society. North Bengal had other film societies like Alipurduar Film Society, Jalpaiguri Film Society, Malda Film Society etc but unfortunately among them only Siliguri Film Society is surviving. Government should look after the infrastructural side of the proposed North Bengal Film City. The film lovers should come up in support of these regional cinemas. We have always heard that people who survive at Hilly region are accustomed of hardship, the same is true for its cinema also. After all these deprivations, it is not only surviving but also growing day by day. Thanks to Siliguri Film Society for organizing Siliguri International Short & Documentary Film Festival specially to recognize and appreciate the works of North Bengal filmmakers. We need more initiatives like this.

Ms. Ananya Adhikary has completed her Masters in English Literature from the Rabindra Bharati University Kolkata.