

Tribute
Anustup Roy

**Basu Chatterjee: The Filmmaker Who Had to Forgo His
Initial Path**



Basu Chatterjee (right) with Mrinal Sen (left) and Salil Chowdhury (centre)

Basu Chatterjee's death led to several propositions by main-stream media. They stated, he was a filmmaker who portrayed middle class values and sentiments in his films. His films often spoke of Bengali middle-class milieus. His films were generally "mithi mithi baatein". It is nothing special about it. Hrishikesh Mukherjee made films alike. But several aspects were missed or rather kept-aside. He made films like *Kamala Ki Maut*, which focused on a certain topic, Pre-marital pregnancy. It is highlighted that in his later phase he came back to Bengali Film Industry and made few Bengali films, before signing off. Coming back to Bengal, was nothing extraordinary. Shakti Samanta did as well, made *Devdas*. But Basu Chatterjee continued with his dose of comedy.

Moreover, he is remembered for his television-serial on Byomkesh Bakshi. During nineteen-eighties many of the acclaimed filmmakers were asked to direct TV soaps. It was during

those days when television industry was growing. Several Directors like Mrinal Sen (*Kabhi Door Kabhi Paas*), Gulzar (*Kiradar*), Basu Chatterjee (*Byomkesh Bakshi*), Kundan Shah (*Wagle ki Duniya* and *Nukkad*) were roped in to generate content, to establish mass audience for television.

The beginning or the journey of the filmmaker is lesser known one. He was born in Ajmer to a Railway employee, almost a century ago. He himself worked as a cartoonist before assisting Basu Bhattacharya in *Teesri Kasam* (1966) and Govind Saraiya's *Saraswatichandra* (1968).

Then in 1969 he debuted with Sara Akash, the same year Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* and Mani Kaul's *Uski Roti* was released. KK Mahajan was the cinematographer for all the three films. It was the beginning of a new film movement sponsored by government of India, via National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC).

If we take a deep look at Sara Akash's opening shoot, it has much to offer for the cinephiles. The film opens with a tracking shot of the walls; camera remains still. The motion is leftwards. The motion of the vehicle leads to the movement. Camera angle changes, just it takes a slight right turn, walls-roads-people-graffiti are made visible. Then there is a sudden jerk, a still of Taj-Mahal can be seen. Hereafter, Title card follows. The ambience sound is mixture of horse's hooves, several noises of the road, a musical instrument being played. As the title of film appears on screen, the instrumental music is accelerated. Again, visual of Taj-Mahal is shown to the audience. This is done to establish the film's setting, the city of Agra. Camera cuts to show right ways. Then after some shots it shifts to left. Camera-alignment comes into play. The director shifts from left to right and vice-versa. Then starts showing backwards motion (the distance between the object and the camera grows on increasing). These axes shifting is repeated time and again. Till a close-up of Taj-Mahal can be seen. Just after the Director's name is shown. The background score has changed with the close-up of Taj-Mahal. Sound of Sanhai can be heard in the soundtrack. The audience is introduced into the household of the protagonist on the day of his wedding. This form never reappeared in Basu Chatterjee's later films. A lesser known fact, acclaimed filmmaker Mani Kaul plays the role of the protagonist's elder brother. Perhaps in his only appearance in front of the camera. To add on, the discussed sequence ably affirms the postulates of an audio-visual medium. Camera movement incorporates the audience into the film. The sound of the horse's hooves and the jerks establishes a horse-drawn cart without showing it for once.

This opening sequence can be related to *Bhuvan Shome*'s introductory sequence. Mostly, because of the motion of the opening shot. Camera angle, music, is varied in these two cases. But the similarity lies in the usage of still of Bhuvan Shome (the character) in the very first frame. The shots which follow show the travel of *Bhuvan Shome*. The use of Taj-Mahal's still in *Sara Akash*.

That is not all as far as connection between Basu Chatterjee and Mrinal Sen are concerned. Chatterjee made *Manzil* (1979) based on Sen's *Akash Kusum* (1965). The ending and the

plot structure vary extensively in these two films. Manzil was remodelled like a formula film to attract audience with a happy ending and melodious song sequences sung by Kishore Kumar. They both worked with Salil Chowdhury as their film's music composer.

He went on creating a series of middle of the road films or films with middle class virtues, sweet romantic or maybe roman-sick comedies. Basu Chatterjee made films like *Swami* (1977), *Shaukeen* (1982) [has a bit of satire in form of comedy in the movie], and *Kamla Ki Maut* (1989), these focused on prevailing societal concerns.

Kamla Ki Maut starts with a suicide of Kamla, who was pregnant. She was yet to get married. Pregnancy of an unwed woman lets the society to point out at her, allows raising questions about her character. This was and is still prevalent in Indian society or in many parts of the world. Kamala's death was decision taken by Kamala due to the burden thirsted upon by the society. Film's narrative narrows down to Kamala's neighbour, Patel family comprised of Charu, Geeta their father Sudhakar and their mother. Further the plot unveils past of these four characters. Their courtships-relationships-intimacy-sexuality. The parents wish that their children turn out like their partner, as they are not at ease with their past. On the same note, the children are tensed about their intimacies with partner. The films treatment is as such, descending into human tendencies, starting with a particular incident, and moving back with lieu of flashbacks into their past.

It can be noted that, *Ek Ruka Hua Faisla* was a model for Tele-Films or rather films meant for television. In the film He, showcased how a closed area can be accommodated into the audience's television screen.

Chatterjee after all this, again moved back to comedy, made films like *Hotath Brishti*, *Tak Jhal Mishti*, *Hocheta ki*, *Hotath Akdin*, all in Bengali. To sum up it can be said, the filmmaker balanced between his thoughts he wanted to share and literary films with plain narrative and dose of laughter set in middle class society. But it would be wrong to analyse him only on the basis, as a maker of *Chitchor* (1976), *Rajnigandha* (1974), among others. But he also made films like *Ek Ruka Hua Faisla* (1986), *Piya Ka Ghar*(1972), which had much social relevance but the form accentuated from his first film into the glamorous yet easy-to-feed-on narratives due to demand of the film industry.

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