

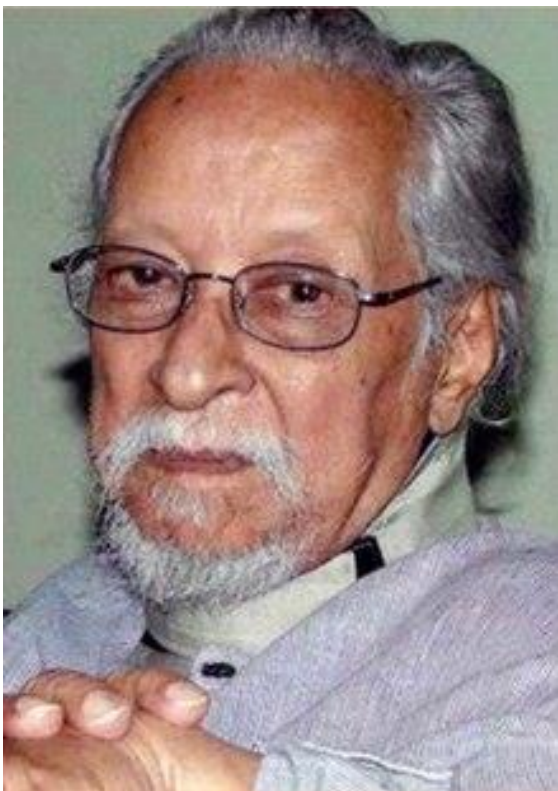
Centenary Tribute: Chidananda Dasgupta

Aruna Vasudev

CHIDANANDA DASGUPTA MEMORIAL LECTURE

Following is the Text of the Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Lecture delivered by Aruna Vasudev, Former President of FIPRESCI-India on 20 November 2020

Chidananda Dasgupta is a legendary figure for film critics and filmmakers in post-Independence India. Perhaps the first serious writer on film who became the doyen of film critics, who joined up with Satyajit Ray, and a handful of others to start the Calcutta Film Society in 1947, whose love for cinema was so deep that he resigned from a lucrative job with the then Imperial Tobacco Company to launch into making films himself.



He produced and directed a number of documentaries and made two feature films –

Bilet Pherat and then *Amodini* which won his wife Supriya the national award for costume design. Apart from articles in newspapers and magazines over fifty years, he authored a number of books, among them “Talking about Films”, “The Painted Face: Studies in India’s Popular Culture” and “The Cinema of Satyajit Ray and his last one “Seeing is Believing – Selected Writings on Cinema”. In addition, he translated Jibananda Das’s poetry from Bengali into English. His progeny too, has done him proud - one of his daughters is actress-director Aparna Sen, and now so is his granddaughter, Aparana’s daughter, Konkona Sen Sharma. Not many writers on cinema can match such a background, such a range of accomplishments.

It is an exemplary life story. After founding the Calcutta Film Society, the Federation of Film Societies of India was set up at his initiative together with Satyajit Ray, Vijaya Mulay and a few others. This Federation played a major role in the spread of the film society movement in India.

I met him many, many years ago. I had just come to India on a visit from my film school days in Paris. I stopped first in Bombay to meet some film people and see what was happening - to know and understand it myself and to respond to questions about Indian cinema at my film school in Paris. This was in the mid-50s when very little about other

cinemas was known in all countries. It was a fascinating moment and I was very excited at discovering the cinemas of India as much as the cinemas of other countries. Meeting Chidananda Das Gupta together with B D Garga at a film function at Bombay was an enriching moment – that went on to last my life. Chidananda was still working with his company but it was clear that his passion was cinema.

Years went by as he continued working in Calcutta and I was in France. But we did meet occasionally and it was clear that he wanted to give up his job and be in the film world. Eventually he did. He made some documentary films, but continued with his job. His first feature film *Bilet Pherat* was well received but did not attract very strong attention. Popular cinema was ruling the audience at that time.

He continued making a few documentaries which did reasonably well. His first was *Portrait of a City*, a documentary on Calcutta produced by the Calcutta Film Society, then his first feature film – *Bilet Pherat* in 1972 which was also fairly well received – fairly because at that time popular Hindi cinema was ruling the film world! He kept up with writing but his love for filmmaking continued and he made a collection of three short features called *Shnaarh* (The Bull), *Gadhaa* (The Donkey) and *Rakto* (Blood)- which featured his daughter Aparna Sen who was on her way to becoming a great actress and now a celebrated director. Then two more documentaries – a beautiful one on Birju Maharaj call *Birju* and finally *Dance of Shiva*. He made his second feature *Amodini* in 1994 which attracted a great deal of praise, but he decided not to devote his life to making films though his work on both documentaries. He wrote a wonderful script called PRINCE on Dwarakanath Tagore (Rabindranath's

grandfather). This almost got made by the British Film Institute, who had approved it. Victor Banerjee had agreed to play Dwarakanath. His daughter Aparna was to be his Chief assistant, but sadly, the project fell through at the last moment.

I suppose for financial reasons – he had a family to support – he took on a job as editor of the magazine published by the American Embassy, for a few years. That was the time we met frequently as they lived nearby. That is when Chitu and I sat and wrote the script for a feature film but alas, we were not able to raise the money for it. And then I came up with the idea of starting a film journal. At that time I thought of journal of a Asian, African and Latin American cinema. We kept discussing the possible ways to raise money for it but that, of course, did not happen! Then I thought of starting a magazine exclusively on Asian cinema. I told Chitu I thought of the name “Cinemaya” and he liked it very much. I put the name on my board next to my desk and kept dreaming of it - but it took a long, long time to materialise...

Later Chitu joined INTACH (International Trust for Art & Cultural Heritage) had recently come into being, and planned a series of documentary films for Doordarshan for INTACH. Approval of the series was held up for a long time by Doordarshan. One day when he and I were talking about it, I said I would talk to them because a college friend of mine had recently become Head of Doordarshan. Happily the series was approved, I joined Chidananda (his nickname was Chitu) at INTACH and we got approval for the first series of 13 documentary films. Chitu made the first film, I made the 13th film....

We got a number of talented directors, some already established, some out to make their first films, to direct the series. Among the directors were Rajiv Mehrotra – now the

founder and head of PSBT, and a number of others making their first film, plus Pramod Mathur, a very well-established documentary filmmaker and other equally well-known directors, to make the series.

There is so much one can write about his writings which should be made compulsory reading for film students! He wrote many articles for us in Cinemaya, principally on Indian cinema and Indian filmmakers, which are classics.

When Fipresci (International Federation of the Film Press) was established in India, (because the President and Secretary of Fipresci – both of whom I knew well - had come to IFFI (the International Film Festival of India) - and told me they were so disappointed that Fipresci was not getting established at India's main Festival. I went and spoke to the Secretary I & B Ministry and he immediately agreed to set it up.

Once it was established we all voted for Chidananda to be the President but he kept saying “no, no Aruna should be president”. I said “no question of that when you are there”! Finally since he did not have a choice, he had to take it on and become the first President of Fipresci in India. And, of course, he did a very good job for four or five years.

He spent a very busy time, and a full life with books, writing, making films and inspiring many of us.....

As we came to the end of the series at INTACH, Chitu and Supriya, his wife, decided to leave Delhi and move to Santiniketan, near Calcutta where his eldest daughter Aparna was established. He had decided to retire and continuing with some writing, but live peacefully in a beautiful setting with his wife and youngest daughter.

Before he left Delhi, he was presented with the Lifetime Achievement award by Osians . He had made such immense contributions to the emerging new cinema

through his writings – as much as the films he managed to make despite so many obligations in his life , from work to a highly talented family – from wife to daughters. His wife was herself a writer, in Bengali, who also translated books and various writings.

He kept telling me to come and visit - and I really wanted to – having always wanted also to visit Santiniketan but alas, I never managed it... Then, when his wife passed away, he moved to Aparna's flat in Calcutta. Then I did go there to visit him - and those last days have left a vivid memory.....

In his writings there is a depth of knowledge and understanding of the art and craft of filmmaking together with a sense of the history and development of cinema in India and internationally. It is a joy to relish a collection of his essays on film within a single book. The collection of books he wrote , and his writings over many years, is dense, and erudite, yet witty and humorous, as he makes references to the sociological, historical and political background to the films and the directors he is writing about. One of his essays - “Of Margi and Desi”, sets the tone of his writing as he makes the same distinction between the classical and the folk for cinema as there is in the other arts, particularly music. His point of reference is not just the frequently quoted Natyashastra, but the thirteenth century treatise the Sangeet Ratnakara “which makes a clear distinction between divine and popular music”. And he goes on to elaborate on the implications and ramifications of this distinction which, he points out, the English translator had not included. It is an illuminating inquiry into the origins of this division and turns into a fascinating exploration of the relationship of cinema to the other arts.

His answer in his article “Why Films Sing” transcends a mere description of music and songs in Indian cinema as he expounds on

the psychological and sociological imperatives that make it such an integral part of India's cinema(s). In "Women, Non-violence and Indian Cinema" he relates the traditional Indian view of woman as non-violent, passive, to the non-violence Mahatma Gandhi used as a weapon against the British and sees the "ideal feminine" in Indian cinema as a corollary of social forces. His essay on "Films as Visual Anthropology" is a unique analysis of the work of Aravindan, of Prema Karant's *Phaniyamma*, and others. From "The Crisis in Film Studies" to "How Indian is Indian Cinema" to "Cinema takes Over the State" (about politics and cinema in South India), his writings stretch the boundaries of knowledge, provoke the reader to question, to argue, to make connections, rather than to passively receive. His writings were a boon in an area where some people – not, alas, all – looked at cinema as a great form of art, not just of entertainment. Both were vividly present in Indian cinema, as indeed in most countries

which is perfectly justified – and also necessary because cinema is indeed a very relaxing form of entertainment which is also needed in any society. But together with that is also a cinema that provokes one's imagination and thought, and helps to understand the way life is, and to cope with it.

Towards the end he wrote regretfully:

"Film criticism has practically disappeared. In all the newspapers the accent is on lifestyle writing. There is hardly any space for film writing anymore. In the past cinema was dependent on what critics wrote...."

There is so much one can write about his writings which should be made compulsory reading for film students! He wrote many articles for us in "Cinemaya", principally on Indian cinema and Indian filmmakers, which are classics.

He spent a very busy time, and a very full and meaningful life.

Ms. Aruna Vasudev, is a Former President and an Honorary Member of Fipresci-India, based in New Delhi.