

## Article

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### **A Film Waiting to be Made**

The history of Indian cinema has for long evinced a close connection between film and literature, particularly in Bengal, where the literary tradition is exceptionally strong. This has often given rise to controversy, usually based on the assumption that literature is the 'pure' or 'primary' art, and that cinema is the 'secondary' art, somewhat like a handmaiden serving her lord. If the film should stray in any way from what is established in the novel or short story, it is deemed unworthy. While regarding the connection between literature and cinema to have immense creative potential, I would happily steer clear of such controversy, hoping that it is sufficient to assert that a novel is a novel, a short story is a short story and a film is a film.

International Movie Database names seventeen films based on novels or short stories of the Bengali writer, Prafulla Roy, and I could name as many or more of his works that might be re-created as excellent films. He is, indeed, a very cinematic writer. So much of his better work represents the East Bengal in which he grew up and the India which he walked around, literally, as a young man, holding the mirror up to nature and representing his world to subsequent generations.

India might be all sorts of things, but rarely if ever boring, and Prafulla Roy's world is one of fascination - a world of colour and noise and beauty and distortion and simple joy and even complex horror. Many of his extraordinary stories would seem to reflect a highly skilled story-teller with a sharp and vivid imagination; but then it is almost anti-climactic to realise that for the most part those stories are recreations of actuality.

Some years ago I read his short novel, *Ramcharitra*, which I translated into English under the title, *The Hypocrite*.<sup>1</sup> I have always been struck by its cinematic quality and would love to see it made into a film by a top-class filmmaker. I recently read my translation of it again, for editorial purposes, and could not help seeing it on my mind's silver screen. It takes place in an appealing setting; it is peopled by characters who range from colourful to extraordinary, all of them undeniably credible; it tells a simple yet pungent story; and, like all good works of narrative art, it gives me a lot to take away from the screen and keep in my mental and emotional bank for as long as I want to think about it.

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<sup>1</sup> To be published in Kolkata by Boichitra Prakashan in 2021.

A long time ago, while talking about the appeal of Indian films, I found for myself a term of convenience: 'Indianness'. It seemed to me then, and it still does, that the appeal of an Indian film - visual, aural, narrative, philosophical - lies in the degree of Indianness in which it is dressed. Of course, Indianness for the sake of it would be simply silly, but a film set in a modern apartment in a big Indian city, with the characters wearing the latest in Western fashions and acting out a story that could have been generated in Hollywood might also run a grave risk of being judged as sterile or unremarkable. Two of my most admired filmmakers, Buddhadeb Dasgupta and Girish Kasaravalli, have made remarkable films that are steeped in or even defined by Indianness. In this light it may be said that Prafulla Roy's novel, *Ramcharitra*, has so much from which to make a rich and memorable film.

The novel is set in a small provincial town in northern Bihar. With certain adaptations the film could, indeed, be set almost anywhere in India, but north Bihar readily underscores the feudal outlook that pervades the narrative. The temporal setting is the month of Agrahayan, as the north wind blows down from the Himalayas heralding the descent of winter to the plains. This would have an impact on the atmospherics of the film which should be tinged with dull colours, certainly not warm and friendly ones, and the early morning and late afternoon should be preferred, with whatever fog or mist that might be on offer being appreciated for its potential enhancement of the narrative. Some substantial sequences are most appropriately set at night.

The narrative is advanced by a simple plot which is buoyed and elaborated by the depiction of the characters and their interactions, enacted in their appropriate settings. Underlying strands of significance are played out to make the simple plot the epicentre of an extensive vortex comprising a critique of Indian democracy and prompting an examination of the moral values and human concerns - or absence thereof - that underpin it. The novel avoids theory, focussing on human actuality. This is its strength, and the film should seek to exploit the same strength. The broader issues should be clearly implied, not didactically stated, and the film's worthiness will accord with the degree to which the audience will be able to embrace these issues and take them away into their personal lives.

The simple plot focusses on Ramcharit Chaube, a wealthy and influential landowner, who is seen by a group of similarly high-caste luminaries of the town (though somewhat less stellar than he) to be their great hope in the imminent election for the state legislature at a time when Hinduism itself is perceived by them to be under grave threat. The danger, it appears, lies in Hinduism's vulnerability to the essentially modern institution of representative democracy, which accords equal value to the votes of high, low and outcaste alike - even non-Hindus are given equal standing. For the high-caste minority to have any chance of holding sway over the rest of society, men like Ramcharit must be elected to parliament. Ramcharit is persuaded to stand and a campaign is launched, including door-knocking, meet-the-people walks and public meetings. Trouble is struck when word gets out that the land on which the town's populous red light quarter stands has been owned by the

Chaubes for some three generations, and Ramcharit's titanic moral stature is made seriously vulnerable. However, the threat is averted by manipulation of convenient circumstances, Ramcharit is elected to the parliament and Hinduism, it is presumed, has been saved by democracy from the menace of - democracy.

The tone of Prafulla Roy's novel is pervaded by a gentle and somewhat black humour, which is sustained by the variety and presentation of the characters, and there is ample opportunity for the same black humour to permeate a film. The opening scene would be as it is in the novel, set against the backdrop of the splendid Ram-Sita temple founded by Ramcharit's grandfather decades before. The aim here is to establish piety. It is very early morning and winter is coming on. Ramcharit, whom Roy describes as in his mid-fifties and still handsome, appears for his morning worship. He would be dressed simply but in clothes made of the finest material, for he is not only pious but highly reputable. However, right at the beginning there is a need to suggest this eminent man's vulnerability to hypocrisy, and this is done by bringing into long shot a man and three women approaching the temple. As they get closer Ramcharit recognises Chaupatlal, a pimp of importance from the red light quarter, and three whores. Chaupatlal is dressed gaudily, in English parlance looking a bit like a spiv, and two of the women would be characteristically over-dressed and looking somewhat tarty. It is the third woman, barely out of girlhood and remarkably beautiful, who explodes into Ramcharit's perception. He is enchanted with her, and this enchantment will be seen to be indelible. Some very funny shots will occur later

when Ramcharit, obsessed with her beauty and unable to rid himself of thoughts of her, 'sees' her through his mind's eye beside his singularly unattractive wife. There is a tension between this spell of enchantment and Ramcharit's righteous indignation at the fact of lowly people such as these threatening the sanctity of the temple with their pollutant presence. Of course, they may not enter the temple and have to be satisfied with touching their heads to the ground while remaining on the road outside, but even that is enough for Ramcharit to feel threatened by the power of their impurity. He hurries home in high dudgeon, permitting himself an occasional look back at the girl who has been introduced to him by Chaupatlal as Ratiya.

Here we might note some metaphorical significance in the local geography. At one end of the town is the lovely Ram-Sita temple, at the opposite extreme is the visually unprepossessing red light quarter, and somewhere in between is Ramcharit's huge and magnificent home. It might be tempting to assert heaven, hell and the world, but it would be more to the point to see the two extremities as indicative of the polarisation of two aspects of Ramcharit's character, for the temple was established by Ramcharit's family, and the red light quarter thrives on land still owned by Ramcharit - indeed, once a month the same Chaupatlal comes to a cabin in the boundary wall of Ramcharit's home to pay him the rent. The allegation of hypocrisy can be clearly implied.

The rest of Ramcharit's morning also has immense visual appeal. His return home from the temple gives the camera considerable scope to represent to us his opulent lifestyle. At various

angles and distances we might see the dominance of Ramcharit's huge two-storey mansion set on four acres of land with a thick, ten-foot high wall all around it. There is a heavy, brass-studded timber gate attended by two amply proportioned gatemens, each armed with rifle and bandolier and magnificently moustachioed. The outside walls declare piety through the devotional illustrations and scriptural quotations which they bear, the pictures being largely two-dimensional and gaudy, the work of local artists. The house contains fifty rooms for two people, Ramcharit and his wife, Gomati, and most of it is used to store much of the harvest from Ramcharit's three hundred acre farm just a few miles away. On the roof is a Shiva temple, containing a large blue image of the god in meditation, to which Ramcharit offers a reverential *pranam*. As a large flock of birds gather and a servant appears on cue bearing a large tray of grain, Ramcharit performs his first act of charity for the day, giving sustenance to these endearing creatures of the air. There can be some excellent high shots from the roof of the large area at the back of the house with its thirty or so elephants, trumpeting as they are washed by mahouts, as well as many horses, milch buffalo and cows. Pious and loving charity will be offered to all these dumb and devoted creatures a little later.

A good designer could do wonderful things with the interior of the house. The magnitude of the structure allows ample scope for imaginative design, though the internal ambience should tend more toward disorder than stylistic definition. The marble floors with expensive durries and the ornately, though not necessarily tastefully, decorated walls might be amusingly compromised

by a cow casually walking through a room or a couple of chickens cackling in a corner. Ramcharit's bedroom is a mixture of traditional and modern, but most noticeably it is cluttered. When he goes in there after feeding the birds, we see that Gomati is still on the bed. She is pallid, excessively fat and unshapely, representing a remarkable contrast to Ratiya. She too is devout - at least, formally - and obsessed with physical cleanliness, bathing at least ten times a day and having the inside of the house washed several times. The house is well stocked with water brought from the river Ganges to fortify purification. Particularly it is used to flick at Ramcharit when he returns from outside, or to smear over the cash brought by Chaupatlal on that particular night in the middle of each month.

Our first view of the town should make us visually aware of the way most people live in stark contrast to the magnificence of the home and lifestyle of the Chaubes. Ramcharit goes into the town in a horse-drawn carriage, behind which run four servants with large containers of gourmet food which the great man will give to stray animals. In case any difficulty should arise from importunate beggars, two lathi-wielding strong-arm men run with them, ready to obviate any nuisance from such depraved humanity.

It is in this context that we meet Ramcharit's nemesis, Thandilal. He is described as lanky and sinewy with stick-like limbs, and is dressed in deprived ostentation in patched and tattered clothes and with slippers made of tyre rubber. He is accompanied by a small group of young boys, barefoot and bare-chested, wearing shorts held up with string. They are waifs, born in

the red light quarter, and to Ramcharit they are utterly unworthy of the air they breathe. There is, at least visually, something Fagan-like about Thandilal and his small troupe; however, the nature of their relationship is not substantiated in the novel, so there is certainly scope for a director to develop something appropriate about them. On the few occasions when Ramcharit is disarmingly confronted by them, they appear unexpectedly, the surprise factor occurring with stark effect. On one occasion he notices them under a large pipal tree. It is an appealing picture, with Thandilal leaning against the trunk, his long and skinny legs crossed, while improvising on his flute; the boys are sitting on branches, legs dangling. Ramcharit is troubled by their very existence, by the untouchability and the moral decadence they represent to him, and by Thandilal's threatening insolence and the vulgar blurts he blows to him through his flute. It could be very funny.

The group of leading citizens with whom Ramcharit meets later in the day and who seek to persuade him to stand for the election are by no means as colourful but they are interesting and socially representative nevertheless. The most appealing of them is the doctor - educated, tending somewhat worldly and modern, at least to the extent anyone can be modern in a mofussil town of northern Bihar. Most of the others are medieval, feudal conservatives, full of their own caste superiority and contempt for all they perceive as being beneath them. It is only the doctor who tries to tutor Ramcharit to values that make sense in a modern democracy, and yet even he identifies with reactionaries to whom democracy is, fundamentally, anathema. In the course of what

might be a very funny scene where the dhoti-clad pillars of the community realise they have strayed inadvertently close to the red light quarter and are seen running in panic and anxiety for their moral safety, their handkerchiefs pressed over their mouths as protection against moral pollution, the doctor remembers that the red light quarter has more than four hundred women pursuing their notorious profession there, and probably all of them vote. He quickly persuades Ramcharit of the political capital to be obtained in wooing those votes, and they all go in - Ramcharit bravely, the doctor confidently, and the others most apprehensively, handkerchiefs still pressed to faces.

Contrary to the often exotic depiction of brothels in certain other films, what we see here is most insalubrious. What Roy describes is a large open space surrounded by squalid shanties. Laundry is hanging out to dry, smoke comes from stoves as cooking is being done on the verandas, there may be a caged bird or two, and there is a small Shiva temple, though nothing to compare with that on the roof of Ramcharit's palatial home. Indeed, the overall contrast between the two realms should be very stark. The girls are dressed for their domestic routine and are not exactly glamorous. There is an interesting initial tension between the men of influence, holding even the ground on which they stand in contempt, and the women, who are nonplussed to see such men in their midst. After a few words from Ramcharit, the girls submissively promise their votes, while in the meantime the party of upright, leading citizens have sensed something inexplicably earthy in their surprised female company and their eyes glimmer with fervour. Inevitably Ramcharit catches a glimpse of Ratiya

but quickly recovers from his instant dizziness. Then they all leave, only to be met by Thandilal and his boys offering derision and raising again the spectre of hypocrisy. And when he gets home, Gomati submits Ramcharit to a frenzy of scrubbing followed by an obligatory consumption of cowdung. It all makes for lively and seriously amusing cinema.

As election day approaches, however, Ramcharit's success seems no longer guaranteed, for a smear campaign - probably started by Thandilal - results in public utterances of unkind slogans and the painting of similarly unkind graffiti on public walls. There is plotting and planning at Ramcharit's campaign headquarters, there are public meetings in support of the low-caste candidate, and there is the ominous, mischievous skulking of Thandilal and his waifs. The narrative proceeds with colour and bluster and a significant degree of drama.

Ramcharit's innate cunning prompts him to make a grand moral gesture: he will wash his holy hands of the blight of the red light quarter. However, so as not to sacrifice land worth good money and not to forgo the four hundred and fifteen votes of the red light quarter, he simply makes plans to transfer the quarter some seven miles away, close to a new steel works which, undoubtedly, will keep the girls happily in work. Then, as a consequence of his highly moral gesture, Ramcharit wins the election.

The film will end with the grand victory parade. Ramcharit, dressed and adorned like an ancient Hindu king, garlanded and daubed with

festive powder, stands humbly in his jeep, waiting to acknowledge the adoration of his voters. There is the spreading of coloured powder, the distribution of sweets and colourful fireworks, all making for an impressive spectacle. But then Thandilal goes one insolent step too far and gets himself a brutal beating from Ramcharit's strong-arm men. As they leave him sprawled on the road, bloodied and unconscious, it is evident that Hinduism is now in safe hands. This should be a shocking conclusion, not just because of the brutality meted out to the helpless Thandilal, but because of the personal pride cloaked in a perverse sense of righteousness that motivates it.

One of the major features that, for me, makes *Ramcharitra* such potentially good cinema is the opportunity it offers for the camera, rather than the dialogue, to express so much of its import. Cinema is primarily a visual art, and the visual scope offered by Prafulla Roy's novel has the depth and the power to minimise the need for narrative dialogue. The visual strength of the film would also consist in the power of the camera to enhance many of the underlying ideas and abstractions that would justify the film's worthiness. Opulence and poverty, piety and obsessiveness, kindness and cruelty, and even Ramcharit's burning lust for Ratiya can all be intimated by the camera without dependence on dialogue. While the film would be visually appealing, especially with its substantial opportunities for the deployment of appropriate aspects of Indianness, it also has scope for amusement and humour. So much of this would emanate from the simple nature of the characters and their interaction with one another, all of which might be buoyed by sensitive and restrained

dialogue. The feudal values of the leadership group, while essentially odious, could indeed be laughed at, as could the studied vulgarity of Thandilal and the superstitious obsessions of Gomati.

*Ramcharitra* has the potential to be a notably entertaining film, but to be more than mere cinematic confectionery it has to engender ideas that a thinking audience might take away with it and ponder over. Perhaps the most prominent issue that might come out of the film is the idea of a caste society in the context of contemporary democracy. Ramcharit, for example, might feel infinitely superior to Chaupatlal, but at the ballot box the two men are of equal value. The processes of democracy have no interest in social status: they do not distinguish between the piety of Ramcharit and his friends and the worldliness of the four hundred and fifteen votes who live in the red light quarter. Yet a democratic polity - anywhere in the world - does have the potential to allow inequality to thrive. The

girls of the red light quarter may or may not give their votes to Ramcharit; he, on the other hand, has the power to put them out of business, and lose their votes if necessary, or to shift them somewhere else and also keep their votes. His power is not based on anthropomorphic religious beliefs or propitiations based on superstition or on quaint beliefs about physical and spiritual purity, but simply on inherited wealth. He is, indeed, charitable, although his charity is restricted to animals and does not extend into the human realm at all. It may seem somewhat ironic that at the outset Ramcharit is called on to exploit the democratic system in order to protect Hinduism from the perceived danger of a threat to its exclusivity, yet this irony is innate in the tension between a secular and supposedly egalitarian polity and a religiously ordained, stratified society. Arising from all this is a very worthy discussion for our times, one that could well be enhanced by a film yet to be made.

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