

**Centenary Tribute: Chidananda Dasgupta**

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**Fond Letter to the Great Master**

It was a time when I could not understand the English language thoroughly. Then, one day I saw that my father had purchased a new book. From the cover, I presumed that either it would be a storybook or a modern interpretation of mythological characters. For the next one week, father immersed himself into the book. Seeing that I became anxious, angry, and jealous too. Because firstly, if he is busy who would read me the cinema page in Telegraph's Sunday edition? Secondly, after examining the book inside out, seeing the known film personalities' giant photographs the more became overwhelmed, I found myself perplexed too as I could not decipher what is

written about them. I couldn't decode the name of the book. Yet, a sense of utmost curiosity and, to an extent, significant amount of respect developed inside me at that very moment for the writer. And thought that one day, I'll plunge into the deep ocean of the book. I will *manthan* the jewels from it. One day!

The name of the book was *The Painted Face*, author- Chidananda Dasgupta.

The formation of the *Calcutta Film Society* in 1947 was a groundbreaking incident in the history of Indian Cinema. Though the *Amateur Cine Society* (1937) and *Bombay Film Society* (1947) were formed in Mumbai till then, their impact on revolutionizing

cinema in India could hardly be seen. It was the *Calcutta Film Society* who introduced the best films of World cinema to our audiences. It created a fresh sense of understanding cinema amongst intellectuals, artists, and cinema lovers. The formation of the *Federation of Film Societies of India* (1959) acted as a thrust force to this awakening. Chidananda Dasgupta was the co-founder of both societies. He was accompanied by Satyajit Ray, Harisadhan Dasgupta, RP Gupta, Vijaya Mule, Satish Bahadur etc.

In 1948, when Jean Renoir visited Kolkata in the context of his film *The River*, most of the Indian filmmakers did not even know about him. But people from *Calcutta Film Society* were the appreciative audience of his envious achievements. Besides him, famous personalities like Vsevolod Pudovkin, Cherkasov, John Houston, Frank Capra, etc. were the guests and speakers of the Society's different programs between 1947-52.

When a greater portion of our fellow Indian audiences was inundated by the romantic melodramatic films of the time, the *Calcutta Film Society* witnessed the grandeur and zest of World cinema; enriched themselves with the struggle and evolution of cinema. And the result was fantabulous. *Pather Panchali* (1955), a historic birth in Indian cinemascope! Mrinal Sen changed the script of *Akash Kusum* immediately after watching *Jules and Jim* (1960) of Francois Truffaut in society's show. The movements lead by a film society and its connection with World cinema had always been credited to filmmakers but not to film critics, neither to the active associates of the society perhaps. The purpose behind the formation of a film society doesn't consist of only film exhibitions and impelling the makers to do/produce more films. It has a tremendous responsibility to create mass awareness about cinema as an art form as well as a mass medium.

Once, Chidananda Dasgupta had to *get about* a government office due to some issues of the society. After some tedious frequent visits when Dasgupta finally met the highly educated, high-ranked officer, he had to convince him about the socio-cultural and

educational importance of cinema. After the dialogues, when Dasgupta was assured that he could make the officer understand the relevance, the officer replied, 'Look, I don't think cinema has anything to do with socio-cultural, educational values. Tell me, is there anything else in films rather than cheap entertainment?'

That happened in the early 50s in Kolkata. If this was the mentality prevalent among educated people of India, then how troublesome it could have been to start a film movement then? Sometimes I think, is it due to the multifaceted career of Dasgupta that had made him a progressive thinker. What shaped him to be a powerful and farsighted writer? Is it because of his involvement in anti-British movements, his lectureship, or being in contact with numerous people due to film society's work?

To be very generic, the lecturers have a structured schema of their creative writing and criticism. Not readers of every age group seem to be interested in those writings for a longer time. Chidananda Dasgupta was also a lecturer, but to our utter astonishment, his writings either English or Bangla were far away from scholarly ethos and monotony. Perhaps a critic is a person of bountifulness who dares to face acceptance as well as rejection.

The question arises here, what is the definition of film criticism? How is it different from a film review? Gaston Roberge has once mentioned that film review is another way of promoting a film, a process of information sharing, personal opinion. On the contrary, film criticism the analysis of personal reaction. It evolves from the critic's psychological, social, ethical point of view. According to Dhiman Dasgupta's Dictionary of cinema, an art critic is an enthusiast first, expert later.

Chidananda Dasgupta also believed that the first and foremost initiative of a critic should be the connection between artiste and audience.

When Dasgupta and few more film critics started writing, their writings were published in the film festival and film society's souvenirs and magazines. Gradually, literary

magazines started publishing articles on films. Filmmakers had started writing about films too. But, considering the huge potential of cinema in India and the vast viewership Indian film industry, a healthy environment for discussing cinema is yet to come.

Celebrating 100th years of film criticism in America, a documentary was made in 2007 and it was named - "For the love of movies". In that documentary, American critic Gerald Peary was being asked, "What is the crisis of criticism? Peary replied: "Simply that if you are a print critic you are in danger of losing your job at any moment".

The crisis Gerald mentioned was the intimidation, and animosity that print media faces to date. The replacement of humans by machines. People have now become solely dependent on the device yet the role of a critic is still full of challenges.

If we put aside film criticism for a while, today's socio-cultural circumstances have become such that in an infotainment program, while sharing historical information, the legend of Indian film, Mr. Amitabh Bachchan is being trolled, an FIR being filed, and every Tom-Dick-Harry has not hesitated to label him as a leftist! This is what the situation is. While writing a criticism a writer has to worry about the socio-political views he has to avoid, the words that might not be liked by the ruling party, cannot appreciate a film that has an anti-government agenda, is always under the fear of being backlashed by the ruling party, then how can writing become somebody's "own writing"? It can't be criticism, mere bribe it is.

Nowadays the success and appeal of a film solely depend on the first week collections, endorsement, and publicity stunts. After watching the premiere show/first show, who would post the first review, who would get the most "views" of the reviews has concise the circumference of film criticism. If Film critics and film analysts become the vehicle of publicity only then how could we expect the industry and audience to remain respectful towards the critic? (In 1920 Louis Delluc had signaled about this type of publicity criticism).

While the contemporary depression devours people like us, the ardent admirers of cinema, Chidananda Dasgupta becomes the ever-flowing river of wisdom for the distressed. Sitting on its bank we rise from disillusionment to nirvana.

In Chitra Samalochna (1987), the definition assigned to film critic does the justice for Dasgupta, I feel. Though no definition can encompass the characteristics of an independent writer, still, the following characteristics may help to elaborate on Dasgupta's exceptional expertise:

1. The socio-economical, geographical, anthropological, political, and historical details were at his fingertips.
2. Skilled in film's technical aspects as well as knowledgeable in acting as he was involved with film society and advertising organizations.
3. His command over English, Bangla, and Hindi languages is exceptional. Readers spontaneously fall for his writings. This may be due to his political transparency and uncorrupted personality which got reflected in his writings.
4. Immense interest in literature leads him to be an avid reader of English, Hindi, Bangla, and Urdu literature.
5. Professionally he used to ignore the closeness to film stars it seems. That's why his writings seemed to be unbiased. He could restrict himself from unessential mutual admiration which had elevated him from a writer to a Man of Dignity.
6. Wit and satire are his spontaneous rhythm. But he never used any insulting, cynical, or disrespecting words. (His wit was so sharp and subtle that while writing this article I had to pause for one day to differentiate the meaning between *kshonojiwi* and *khsonejiwi*. Literally both the words indicate the same meaning - transient. But he was such a skillful writer that I couldn't take a risk of probable misinterpretation!)

7. Though sometimes, in his writings, sheer regionalism can be seen yet in most of his writings, specifically in English writings, a sense of Indianness is present which truly helps a reader from any corner in India to connect.

8. He was a keen observer of our society.

A few years earlier, a writer once asked me, "Why do you write about the performance of an artiste in a film? About an actor? This is a film, not a drama. The film is all about technology."



I didn't answer anything on that day. But when I look into the writings of Dasgupta, I see that from Guru Dutt to Amitabh Bachchan, he analyzed all the performances. From mainstream movies to art houses films, he discussed every stream of public views.

In the contemporary scenario, when the political faces and film industry has got mixed up, The on-screen performances have become less colorful of some actors than their public views, then only the netizens and media pundits have discovered the actual face behind the public faces. But back in the '80s, Dasgupta studied and picked up the correlation between politics, media, and image building of actors. How did the demigod characters of MTR and NTR in their film help them paved a smooth entry to politics, he illustrated them all back then in the *Painted Face of Politics*. Referring to a journalist, he has written about NTR as, "He sits like Duryodhana, walks like Rama and talks like Krishna".

In an interview, Aparna Sen said that the first Bangla film she watched was *Pather Panchali*. She wasn't allowed by her father to watch any Bengali films before that. The question arises here..... Did Dasgupta deny the importance of mainstream Hindi films and popular regional films? Generally, it seems that people from film society are more inclined towards parallel films. Though the extent of the selection of films has become vast, and so as the progressive audience is today compared to Dasgupta's era, the apathy towards mainstream films is still there among some of the film activists and critics of the world.

But Dasgupta was enthusiastic about the term cinema. He argues with scientific reasoning while illustrating the unreasonable success of a mainstream Hindi film. He had shaken the myth which says that parallel film is the opposite of mainstream Indian cinema.

Generally, both the good and bad qualities of a person's genes can be seen in their descendants. Both generations don't need to have the same or even better professional expertise. But Aparna Sen and Konkona Sen Sharm's talent and personality reflect their love and allegiance towards cinema, which is definitely coming from their roots. This root helped them to find their individual places in the mainstream as well as in regional films. Aparna Sen herself is a very vocal and fearless critic of society, too.

Dasgupta seemed to be a sensitive reader of Satyajit Ray's philosophy of life. While discussing Ray's films in the Cinema of Satyajit Ray, he has mentioned him as a silent observer of life. The way a filmmaker's philosophy and ideology get reflected in his movie, a writer's attitude towards life and the whole universe can be seen through his writings. The impersonal attachment that is felt in Ray's handling of characters transforms into emotional detachment in Dasgupta's style of criticism. Although the latter's observations have been very inquisitive.

Dasgupta translated Jibananda Das's poetry collection, which is an epitome of how avid a reader of poetry he was. His literary prowess was over-shadowed by his popularity

in film criticism. His skillful storytelling can be felt in his film *Amodini* (1994). In an essay on background music, he has mentioned that *Rabindra Sangeet* blossoms innumerable images in the listener's mind but if melody (sur) is connected to then only it transmits sentiment (rasa). In another writing, he said, "Songs have an important climatic, orgasmic function as well, Indian cinema being the most erotic in the world behind its puritanical façade.....The onrush of the big sound orchestra and the loud voice bursting forth is very orgasmic in its sudden release". From both of these essays, it's quite distinct how concerned he was about the Indian history, heritage, and culture, to the film distributors, producers, and a new audience's requirements.

The reinterpretation of mythology and scientific exploration of religious customs had always been the driving force of his socio-historical writings. It's so surprising, and optimistic to see that a person, born in 1921 had closely observed women's dignity and had openly written about it. A person who had dedicated his whole life towards the upliftment of art and society was the son of an orthodox Brahmo missionary!

One of the most appealing styles of his writing was his capability to defragmenting the lyrics and dialogues of the discussed film. The English translation of Sahir Ludhianvi's famous song "Yein Duniya agar mil Bhi Jae to kya hai" from Guru Dutt's *Pyasa* (1957) is an apt example of this.

What will I gain if I win the world,  
Where youths loaf around shiftless,  
Where young bodies are decked out for sale,  
Where love is but a business deal?

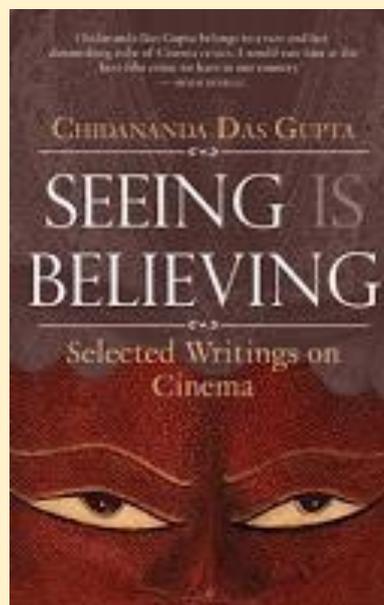
His films, *Portrait of a city* (1961) and *The Dance of Shiva* (1968) proclaim his command over music, *shayari*, and deep understanding of filmography. But this is infact sad that his films are not available on any streaming platform for us. Neither notable

researches and discussions can be seen about him and his creations.

Things I have learned from him:

1. There's no substitute for honesty.
2. Just read, read, and read.....
3. *Sobar upore manush satya, tahar upore nai....*

A critic may not always be correct; there might be disparity of opinion between him and the audience and filmmaker. But the prime fact of a critic is that he should be honest to the medium. He might be the mate of the film industry but should never be an attendant to it.



Today, when I see art and artiste being intoxicated by the materialistic goals, common man questing for ambrosia in the mirages, I look up and try to inhale the essence he had followed ---- "In myth, things lose the memory that they were once made" (Ronald Barthes).

Undoubtedly, he is not an idol to be worshipped; he never wanted to be one.

But the little girl who has grown up now, and who knows that "that kind of" charm and agni would never come out from her pen, for her he remained the great master, forever.

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