

Tribute: Father Gaston Roberge**Someswar Bhowmik****Gentle Colossus in Communication Studies****1**

On August 26, 2020, a man died— thousands of kilometres away from the land in which he was born; but he passed away peacefully in a place he loved to call “home”. He was a very polite and reserved person, to the point of being self-effacing. But once he started talking, he would keep his audience spellbound. He was a teacher, scholar and theoretician. But above all he was a dreamer, one who could not only fascinate others by the beauty, nuances and conviction of his dreams but also would wait for no one to help him achieve them—he would plunge headlong into transforming them into reality, alone. So, over a period of six decades he brought many such dreams to fruition and thus has left us a rich legacy, which will keep enriching the domains of our knowledge, as well as academic and practice for years to come. Almost all his obituaries have characterised him as “the high priest of Film Studies” in India—obviously alluding to his association with a Christian congregation¹ and his passion for cinema. However, by characterising Father Gaston Roberge (1935-

2020) in this way one would invariably undermine, and limit, his significant contribution to the broad spectrum of “Communication Studies”, beyond the realm of “Film Studies”.

What follows is an attempt at contextualising the diverse academic pursuits that Fr. Roberge had undertaken beyond his priestly duties.

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To a stranger, he would always utter four sentences by way of self-introduction: ‘I was born in Montreal, Canada in 1935. I joined the Jesuit Order in 1956. I was reborn in India on October 15, 1961. For the last several decades I have been living mostly in Kolkata. I love it.’ His well-wishers used to ask, ‘Why would you stop at only three incarnations? Why avoid the fourth, and the most important, one?’

To his well-wishers from the secular realm, Fr. Roberge will forever be remembered by the characteristics of his fourth incarnation, which materialised on October 5, 1970. It was the day a media research centre named Chitrabani was inaugurated under his leadership. For the next twenty-five years he nurtured this dream project of his with missionary zeal and strong perseverance almost befitting an activist. That this institution has survived twenty-five more years even after he left it in April 1996 is a testimony to the strength and validity of its foundational principles. The fragrance of his dream has outlived the dreamer and the name of Fr. Roberge’s still remains synonymous with Chitrabani.

The seeds of this organization were sown in his mind nine years ago, in October 1961. Following in the footsteps of Mother Teresa, 21-year-old Gaston Roberge had decided to travel to India for Christian missionary work. The evening before boarding a ship from New York, he fortuitously had the opportunity to watch Ray's *Apu-Trilogy*²—his maiden encounter with the milieu that he had chosen to work in. That experience provided him with a direction of work that would run parallel to, and complement, his main vocation as a Jesuit priest. Before his ship touched Indian shores, Roberge had made up his mind to dedicate his life in India to building an empathetic relationship with the people of that unfamiliar country. Remarkably, Roberge's favourite Manikda (Satyajit Ray)³ too had decided on beginning a film career during his voyage back to home from London in 1950.

For nine long years after setting foot in Kolkata, Fr. Roberge prepared himself meticulously before plunging into his chosen vocation. [Of course, his congregation also helped him in this respect.] The first step in that direction was to immerse himself in *Pather Panchali*—not so much the novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay⁴ as the film of Satyajit Ray. As a result of that ‘reading’, a remarkable text of interpretation-analysis emerged incorporating shot-by-shot decoding. And the first receptors of that text were the high school students at St. Xavier's Collegiate School of Calcutta (now Kolkata)⁵, who assembled over the weekends to discuss the film. In other words, Fr. Roberge was not only immersed in his own analysis, he was sharing it with some inquisitive fresh minds. Not many people know about his very first treatise called *Mass Communication and Man* (1972) which included these original notes on *Pather Panchali*. But thanks to this, Fr. Roberge made friends with Ray. It paved the way for a three-decade-long friendship—marked by enthusiastic engagement and fruitful collaboration.

Satyajit Ray was the chief advisor of 'Chitrabani' till his death. But several other persons had close contact with this organization — Mrinal Sen⁶, Marie Seaton⁷, Deepak Majumder⁸, Shamik Bandyopadhyay⁹, Utpal Kumar Basu¹⁰, Rita Roy (who wrote poetry under the name Kobita Sarkar)¹¹, Jayanta Chowdhury¹², Gautam Chattopadhyay¹³, Alamgir Kabir (from Bangladesh)¹⁴, to name a few luminaries. The vision of this social communication centre was (and still is) to foster 'a human touch in communication'. As the centrepiece of that 'humanitarian' work, an enviable library was set up here under the direct supervision of Fr. Roberge and with painstaking care and hard work of Sunetra Ghatak¹⁵. Around it began studies and research in, as also engagement with, three technology-driven and impactful mass media—viz. photography, radio and cinema. Professional works were undertaken in recording and graphic design studios. These facilities invariably used high-end equipment by contemporary standard. The output struck everybody with their high quality and remarkable standards. But Fr. Roberge was very clear about the role of the mass media. He explained to his students and admirers that the key to modern mass media lay in technology-mediated communication, where two or more people sitting in two or more places are connected by an instrument. He emphasised that in modern society technology acts as a bridge between the humans, so in the end everything depends solely on the functionality or efficacy of technology. Technology takes the driver's seat. In other words, technology becomes the principal player in the success of this seemingly humane communication process, and the role of humans becomes secondary. So much so that in many cases technology itself manipulates and controls this process, even determining the boundaries of communication—the human beings reduced to the role of mere puppet. The more the technology progresses the more powerful becomes its role as a manipulator controlling and subverting human mind and even thought process. Such warnings he uttered and articulated for the young and inexperienced, who were struck by the lure of photography, fascinated by the communicating power of radio, overawed by the illusion of cinema, and moreover, wondering in what capacity they could get involved with these powerful yet effective media. Fr. Roberge had never underestimated the role of technology in communication. At the same time, he urged the young to be aware of the pros and cons of using technology lest they fell victim to its prowess. He explained repeatedly and emphatically that human beings are the real stakeholders in the process of communication, technologies are mere supplements, without any normative role *per se*— it is neither good nor bad. It is the human beings, more specifically the media managers, who have devised and assigned whatever normative credentials technologies have acquired. The merits and demerits of the communication process are determined by how people use technology. Finally, he would say, if human beings surrender themselves to technology, the communication process will be largely meaningless. Human beings have to take decisive control of technology, never the other way round.

Fr. Roberge also understood that ignoring or avoiding the development of technology would only lead to putting fetters on the improvement and expansion of the communication process. It was from this perspective that he got involved in various initiatives preceding and after the introduction of television technology in this country. He devoted himself to deciphering the intricacies of this medium, constantly encouraging people close to him to study the medium. He was directly associated with the Government of India's Satellite Instructional Television Experiment or SITE, in 1975¹⁶. Initially it was decided that resources of Chitrabani would be used in this experiment. Later, however, that plan did not materialize. But Fr. Roberge remained an integral part of all the government initiatives that were undertaken to finetune and improve on the method of television

communication, especially its educational significance and social impact—which were then the priority of the government. One of the prominent outcomes of these initiatives was the establishment of the Audio Visual Research Centre or AVRC in August 1986 with funding from the University Grants Commission or UGC and under St. Xavier's College, Calcutta. Until April 1996, this centre was located in the small building on Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Road that also housed Chitrabani, with Fr. Roberge as its Director. It needs to be pointed out here that of the 20 such centres that have been set up till date with the financial support of UGC, 19 are attached to universities, either central ones or state-funded. Only in Calcutta an undergraduate college has been given this responsibility, bypassing institutions like University of Calcutta, Jadavpur University and Rabindra Bharati University¹⁷. No prizes for guessing why—Fr. Gaston Roberge. Since he moved to Calcutta in 1961, he was all along associated with St. Xavier's School and College. These two institutions gained considerable visibility in the field of communication studies, thanks to this one person. In 1986, he was an internationally acclaimed scholar, theorist and teacher on media and communication. So, it was almost a foregone conclusion, if not axiomatic, that the responsibility for the AVRC would be handed over to Fr. Roberge. But he was no mere figurehead administrator. Everybody was amazed at the perseverance and concentration with which he tried to grasp the impact of this new medium in the field of social communication—this, despite his fame as an acclaimed scholar. Inquisitiveness and perseverance were the two traits that defined the scholarship of Roberge.

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His admirers marvelled at the elan and ease with which Fr. Roberge carried out his triple role as an expert, theorist and teacher. In fact, it was a testament to his inexhaustible vitality, as well as his persona combining a lively self and alert mind always eager to connect with the people around, especially the young ones. Sitting down to talk with him meant getting exposed to a host of fresh ideas. One often used to wonder whether the ideas that he expounded a few days earlier had been subsumed under these new ones. But time and again he would prove that such scepticism was misplaced. None of his ideas, however sketchy or tentative, was left unexplored. Such was his tenacity and sense of purpose. Each one of his writings and lectures exuded a rare charm, evinced the depth of his theoretical knowledge and his capacity for critical thinking. But his style encompassed indescribable simplicity and grace. Full of simple words, and devoid of complex long sentences, his writings and oral presentations did not give the impression of showmanship and intellectual snobbery. His main purpose was to engage intimately with his readers by stirring their sensibilities and emotions. Fr. Roberge did not believe in challenging his readers or listeners, but would step forward and hold their hand camouflaging his theoretical expertise behind an air of simplicity—a Human Touch in Communication. And whenever he addressed students in a classroom, he would say, reassuringly, “Pedagogy is to start from where you are”.

His approach towards Film Studies is a case in point. He was very clear in his mind that there are two ways a person can engage with films. One is the path of film appreciation, and the other is that of film scholarship. He considered both as important, but different in nature. And he had a very methodical, but beautiful, way of articulating that difference. The following is a tabular form of his exposition, which one finds in detail between pages 103-108 and pages 147-148 of his book *Communication Cinema Development: from morosity to hope* (1998):

Film Awareness or Appreciation	Film Scholarship
1. Films are fun.	1. Films arouse emotions.
2. Some films are more rewarding than the others.	2. Films convey Concepts.
3. Some films are more meaningful than the others.	3. Films are products of Technology.
4. Films are determined by Society.	4. Films are Texts.
5. Films are part of the Social Dynamics.	5. Films are Socio-Cultural Products.
	6. Films articulate Ideologies.
	7. Films recycle / reformulate Myths.
	8. Films are Simulations.
	9. Films are Artworks.

The above epitomises the simplicity of his methods, which at the same time were very effective.

Without hesitation, he introduced his followers or admirers to some of the leading scholars of culture of our times— Lev Kuleshov¹⁸, Sergei Eisenstein¹⁹, Svevolod Pudovkin²⁰, André Bazin²¹, Jean Mitri²², Marshall McLuhan²³, Theodor Adorno²⁴, Walter Benjamin²⁵, Michelle Foucault²⁶, Paolo Freire²⁷, Roland Barthes²⁸, Jacques Lacan²⁹, Fredrick Jameson³⁰, Ivan Illich³¹, to name just a few. But he would them give a free hand, and would not burden them with the weight of his own wisdom. They made it into a habit of sitting in the library of 'Chitrabani', study the works of these stalwarts and meet him with various queries. He was a patient listener and spoke gently in a low voice, with a clear accent, modulating his tone, occasionally looking at the person(s) across, shaking his hand a little, and always putting a smile on his face—all these were normal manifestations of his personality. He himself used to say, “I do research on technology-driven communication, but I rarely rely on these to convey my message to you, I will rely on my words, my writing.”

The first thing that strikes one when one carefully glances through his writings and the list of books that he wrote is that Roberge did not confine himself to the discussion of movies only. The main titles of his select bibliography are as follows:

Mass Communication and Man (1974)

Chitrabani: a book on film appreciation (1975)

Films for an Ecology of Mind (1978)

Mediation: the action of Media in society (1978)

Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible: an analysis (1980)

Another Cinema for Another Society (1985)

The Subject of Cinema (1990)

The ways of Film Studies: film theory and the interpretation of films (1992)

Communication Cinema Development: from morosity to hope (1998)

Cyberbani: being a human in the New Media environment (2005)

Media Dancers: who sets the tunes? (2008)

To view movies the Indian way (2010)

It is not difficult to understand that over time (and that period is not short, almost six decades) he closely observed the various stages of the evolution, expansion and explosion of the media. But the apparent 'diversity' of his chosen subjects actually contains an underlying 'unity'. Roberge carefully weaved this concept of "unity" by minutely examining the characteristics of various mediums, and taking into account the views of various scholars— that communication must have to be humane, the mass media must be used for the welfare of the people, care must be taken so that the multifaceted but concrete identity of 'humans' and their matching voices are not subsumed by the diffuse idea of faceless 'mass'. Roberge wanted different categories of human beings identified as individuals, local communities, social groups as well as international communities to have dignified presence in the world of technology-based 'mass media'. He wanted people to come here not merely in the role of readers-viewers-listeners, but as active and concerned stakeholders.

Like his formulation about the difference between Film Appreciation and Film Studies, Fr. Roberge has formulated his ideas and observations about the duality of the media impact on society in his book, *Mediation: the action of Media in society* (1978, p. 127), following leads given by the German media scholar Hans Magnus Enzenberger³²:

Repressive Use of the Media	Emancipatory use of the Media
1. Centrally controlled programming.	1. Decentralized programming.
2. One transmitter / channel, many receivers.	2. Every receiver a potential transmitter.
3. Immobilization of isolated individuals.	3. Mobilization of the masses.
4. Depoliticization.	4. A political learning process.
5. Passive consumer behaviour.	5. Interaction between those involved, and feedback.
6. Production by specialists.	6. Collective production.
7. Control by property-owners, bureaucracy.	7. Self-control by self-organisation.

He went back again to these issues in his books *Cyberbani: being a human in the New Media environment* (2005) and *Media Dancers: who sets the tunes?* (2008).

To a careful reader, all these books are actually part of his grand narrative, with different chapters written at different times. However, we do know that Roberge could not bring his grand narrative to a denouement or closure, especially as not all of his thoughts on Bharat Muni's³³ great

work *Natya Shastra*³⁴ were penned down. He believed that *Natya Shastra* is a work equivalent to Aristotle's³⁵ *Poetics*³⁶, but the real evaluation of Bharat Muni's work in the field of application of the socio-culture of this country has not been done even today. And he took it upon himself to venture into this application in the realm of Indian cinema.

He wrote, in his *To view movies the Indian way* (pp. 16-17):

“...a film is a viewer who imagines the sequence. For, without someone to imagine a sequence from the audio-visual one that appears on the screen and sounds from it, there can be no film. But in order to grasp one's film experience one needs a vision, a theory, to 'name' one's experience, react to it with one's heart and integrate the whole experience in one's life, individual and social.

In my opinion, it is typical of the Indian culture to react to a film—as to any art object—through the heart, rather than primarily through the mind, that is, the reason. This distinction is not a judgement, suggesting that one approach is better than the other—it is a statement of a fact, namely a difference in persons reacting to life.”

In the twenty-six years from 1970 to 1996, he had a fairy-tale journey, revolving around two institutions he had built—Chitrabani and AVRC/EMRC. For the next twenty-four years although he did not head any institution, his contribution as a teacher was immensely valuable to some important learning centres—especially the Roopkala Kendro³⁷ and the St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata.

Fr. Roberge wanted to reach out to people in his own way, by relentlessly discussing the pros and cons of human engagement based on mass media. He believed that this should be the focal point of studies and research on media. And he also believed that there was not one way of pursuing these. Diversity in perspectives and methods was but inevitable in such endeavours involving human beings engendering their multiple identities. This precisely was his pioneering contribution to media research in this country. It is now our responsibility to carry forward his legacy in our own individual ways.

Notes

1. He was a member of the Roman Catholic congregation 'Society of Jesus'.
2. Consisting of *Pather Panchali* ('Song of the Little Road', 1955), *Aparajito* ('The Unvanquished', 1956) and *Apur Sansar* ('The World of Apu', 1959).
3. Ray (1921-1992) is arguably the most accomplished filmmaker India has produced, by virtue of his mastery over script-writing, direction, lyric composition and music composition.
4. Bandyopadhyay (1894-1950) was one of the doyens of modern Bengali fiction, especially novel.
5. Actually, the St. Xavier's Collegiate School, the school section of the educational institution, set up and managed by the Society of Jesus.
6. Sen (1923-2018) was, like Ray, a renowned filmmaker who excelled in critical and polemical cinema.
7. Seton (1910-1985) was an art, theatre and film critic and biographer of eminent personalities, including Sergei Eisenstein, and Satyajit Ray.

8. Majumdar (1934-1993) was a poet, activist and communicator always eager to do something unique.
9. Bandyopadhyay (b. 1940) is an accomplished book-editor, and a renowned critic and commentator on art, theatre and film.
10. Basu (1939-2015) was poet, chronicler and communication expert.
11. Ray (1935-1993), who wrote under the pen-name of Kobita Sarkar, was a film critic and commentator.
12. Chowdhury (1924-1982) was distinguished radio artist, who had worked for All India Radio, Voice of America and the radio wing of Chitrabani.
13. Chattopadhyay (1948-1999) was a singer, songwriter, composer and filmmaker.
14. Kabir (1938-1989) was a film director and cultural activist.
15. Sunetra (1955-2017) was a niece of Ritwik Ghatak (1925-1976) and a film critic, writer and communication person in her own rights. Her husband Satinath Chattopadhyay (1951-2000) was a cultural journalist and film critic and son Parambrata Chattopadhyay (b. 1981) is an accomplished actor, director, producer.
16. SITE was an experimental satellite communications project designed jointly by the USA's National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO). The project aimed at making available informational television programmes to carefully chosen rural locations. The main objectives of the experiment were to educate the financially backward and academically illiterate people of these select locations on various issues via satellite broadcasting, and also to help India gain technical experience in the field of satellite communications.
17. These centres were established initially produce educational television programmes for undergraduate students. Subsequently their mandate was changed to producing multimedia educational resources and designing courses for online delivery. The original idea was to deliver quality educational resources to socio-economically challenged areas and population.
18. Kuleshov (1899 – 1960) was a legendary filmmaker and *avant garde* artist.
19. Eisenstein (1898 – 1948) was a Soviet film director and film theorist, a pioneer in the theory and practice of montage.
20. Pudovkin (1893 – 1953), actor, filmmaker, teacher, and an associate of Kuleshov. He had his own theory about film-editing.
21. Bazin (1918-1958) was an influential French film critic and film theorist of the 1940s and 1950s, and co-founder of the renowned film journal *Cahiers du cinéma*,
22. Mitry (1904-1988) was another influential French film theorist, critic and filmmaker, a co-founder of France's first film society, and, in 1938, of the Cinémathèque Française film library-cum-archives.
23. McLuhan (1911-1980) was a Canadian philosopher, who contributed heavily to media theory. He is famous for coining the expression "the medium is the message" and the term *global village*, and also predicted the World Wide Web almost 30 years before it was invented.
24. Adorno (1903–1969) was a multifaceted German personality, who contributed immensely as philosopher, sociologist, psychologist, musicologist and composer. He was a leading member of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, for whom the works of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Karl Marx (1818-1883), and George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) were indispensable for constructing a critique of modern society.
25. Benjamin (1892–1940) was a German Jewish cultural critic and essayist. Another important member of the Frankfurt School, he gradually grew in stature as a philosopher and critical theorist.
26. Foucault (1926–1984) was a French historian of ideas, political activist and philosopher, associated with the structuralist and post-structuralist movements (although he himself rejected these labels). His theories primarily address

the relationship between power and knowledge, and how they are used as a form of social control through societal institutions.

27. Freire[a] (1921–1997) was a Brazilian educator and philosopher, best known for his advocacy of critical pedagogy. His influential work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) is widely hailed as one of the foundational texts of the critical pedagogy movement.

28. Barthes (1915–1980) was a French literary theorist, essayist, philosopher, critic, and semiotician. He helped in and influenced the development of such schools of theory as structuralism, semiotics, social theory, design theory, anthropology, and post-structuralism.

29. Lacan (1901-1981) was a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist. Sometimes dubbed as “the French Freud,” and “the most controversial psycho-analyst since Freud”, he was an influential figure in the history of psychoanalysis.

30. Jameson (b. 1934) is an American literary critic, philosopher and Marxist political theorist. Best known for his seminal work *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), he is engaged in the analysis of contemporary cultural trends, particularly analysis of postmodernity and capitalism.

31. Illich (1926-2002), like Fr. Roberge, was a Roman Catholic priest, theologian, philosopher, and social critic. His pathbreaking book *Deschooling Society* (1971) criticises modern society's institutional pre-structured approach to education.

32. Enzensberger (b. 1929) is a German author, poet, translator and editor, who has also made significant contribution to such diverse fields of communication as theatre, film, opera, radio drama, and reportage. His best known book on communication is *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media* (1974).

33. Bharata Muni was an ancient scholar on dramaturgy and histrionics, especially Sanskrit theatre. He is believed to have lived between 200 BCE and 200 CE, but estimates vary.

34. *Natya Shastra* is a practical manual for production of successful theatrical and public performances, which included recitation, oration, music and dance as well as acting. Attributed to Bharata Muni, it is believed to have been systematically compiled over a period between 200 BCE and 200 CE.

35. Aristotle (c. 384 B.C. to 322 B.C.) was an Ancient Greek philosopher and scientist who made significant and lasting contributions to nearly every aspect of human knowledge, from logic to biology to ethics and aesthetics.

36. *Poetics* (c. 335 BC) is the earliest surviving work of dramatic theory and first extant philosophical treatise to focus on literary theory.

37. An Institute of Film and Social Communication formed out of an Indo-Italian technical cooperation in 1995 and managed by the Government of West Bengal. It imparts training in audio-visual production and also acts as a resource-development facility for addressing socio-economic challenges faced by the poor, marginalized and socially excluded sections of population.

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