

*Tribute to Buddhadeb Dasgupta***Dipsikha Bhagawati****The Indigenous Chromosome: Reverence Personified**

*"Most important of all is the respect you get"* - Ghunuram as 'Bagh Bahadur'

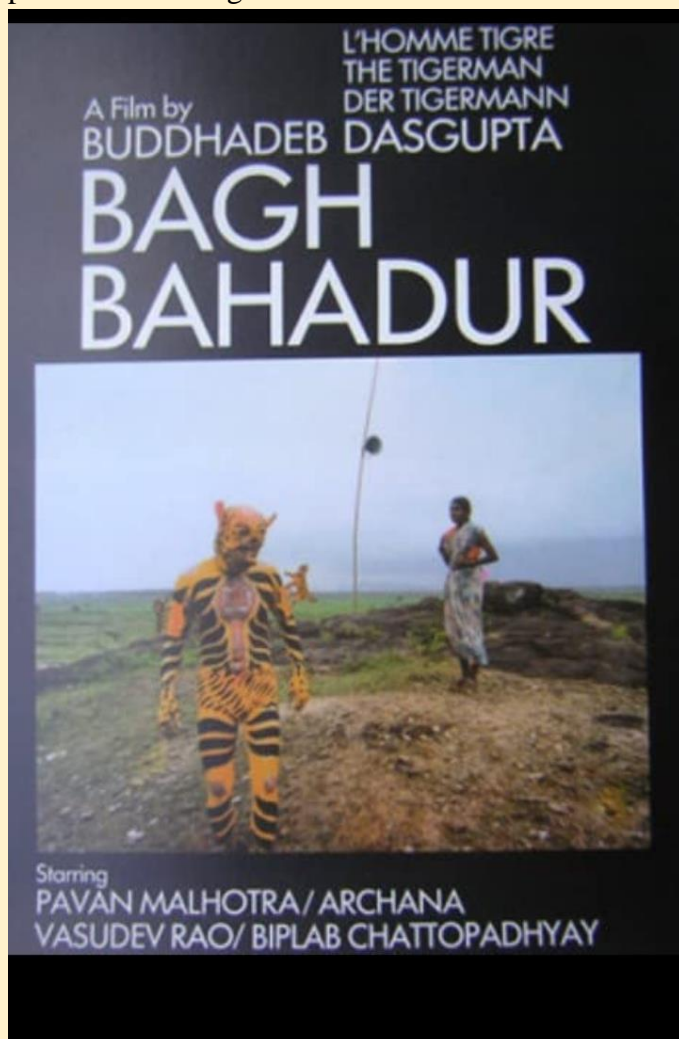
The old drummer's passionate hands evoke wild beats on the drum, Ghunuram (*Pavan Malhotra*) projects in himself the life and emotions of the people of his familiar fraternity, dances his heart out with all his proline passions for this aesthetics sojourn, in love for an inherited genre. He bears that rare chromosome of valour from his ancestors, who fought against the Britishers in the guise of tigers. That feline sway of bravery and honour was inbuilt in him, and so, despite of his awfully struggling life, he considered life to be a sport of dignity, not of surrender.

Buddhadeb Dasgupta, a professor in Economics, who left his job only to become a full time filmmaker, is the most notable director of the Indian film clan, just after the magnificent trios-- Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen. *Bagh Bahadur*, a 1989 film by the master is a sensitive visual exploiting the pathetic story of a traditional dancer, his declining graph of career, whose dance

was not only a story of physical movement or commercial cacophony, but beyond these - a support to his precious legacy of craft and bravery. It was a symbol of tradition, and the protagonist bearing this aesthetic trend. Ghunuram, is the determined emblem of its struggling story of survival in front of the rising challenge, generated by a modern source of entertainment-- din, possessing no living or honed sense of culture or bearing any emotional endeavour, reflecting the flows of life of the masses.

Ghunuram, a drudge, takes a month off from his tedious schedule of livelihood every year to come to his village Nonpura, a village in West Bengal, to perform a rural folk dance form of Bengal - 'tiger dance', which he has inherited from his forefathers. He dresses up as a tiger and performs in the village. His being a 'tiger' is not a superficial representation of an animal, but a larger than life projection. The gravity of this royal being, its posh, feline moves, its valour and grandeur, its instinct of never letting the

hook off is thoroughly symbolic of a heroic story of struggle, of survival, of honouring an age-old tradition, and all these attributes are allegorically personified through Ghunuram.



Buddhadeb Dasgupta maneuvers the themes of supplantation and alienation in *Bagh Bahadur*, but his stand here is more political than ever. Ghunuram, who is also a migrant labourer, wants to hold on to the respect that the generational art form he has mastered offers him. He won't compromise on the last scrap of propriety that he has left in his life. But life has planned some other route for him, that was beyond his imagination.

Like the previous years, he comes to Nonpura for a month, to perform his tiger dance, being assisted by his ally, his guide and co performer Sibal Chacha (*M.V. Basudeva Rao*). For the entire year, he too waits for Ghunuram, whom he calls as Ghunu, out of a close chemistry of love and interdependence. He said, 'Although the year, my hands just wait to play drum with you.'

But this year has brought such misfortune to their lives, that never existed even in their unconscious level of understanding. While returning to his village, Ghunu confronts a circus party carrying a real leopard in a cage, but he never imagined it to be a contender of his imminent doom and disaster. This time, he dreamt of settling permanently in Nonpura with the money he would collect from his dance performance, as he does every year and getting into a matrimonial thread with Radha, daughter of his dear Sibal chacha.

" ..this time I will settle things with your father... I'm going to dance as never before this time, like a real tiger and with my earning. I will build a little house here in Nonpura...you can sit and look at yourself all day... in the mirror, I will work on the land. I'll teach The Tiger Dance to the village boys..

Radha: You like to dream, don't you?

Ghunuram: Who doesn't? You will see, this dream will come true.."

But, how could the poor fellow know that things are going to fall apart, a wild leopard is going to grasp his world. The potent director has used the leopard not just as a wild animal, who is well trained, but as a symbol of extending urbanism, that was going to kill a living tradition with its hollow, lifeless merchandising. Dasgupta has transformed the visual to be a classic portrayal of the unvarying destruction of pastoral folk traditions at the hands of ostentatious urban culture, and the conflict between the old and the new in the form of a cinematically vital and prodigious classical tragedy.

Ghunu's downfall starts when he is at the peak of his innocent expectations. Like the other years, he dresses up himself as a real tiger and steps out to the village with Sibal chacha, spirited, full of joy. But when those circus people in glittering costumes, goes round the village singing an old Hindi film song "*Leke pehla pehla pyar, bhar ke aankho me khumar, jadu nagri se aaya hai koi Jadugar..*", spreading the announcement about the sport between a real tiger and their master, Samba Ustad in the Eastern ground, people become more attracted towards this spell from the '*jaadu nagri*' (magic city), because it would be a never before thing for them, and it is a rule of the world that



people want change, sometimes even at the cost of sacrificing something really worth.

The spark of anything new is always lucrative for the groundlings, and more to those, who have very little access to the outer world, and thereby possess little knowledge about the aesthetic value of any vintage art. This whole process is so obvious and spontaneous that anyone can be hardly blamed, and the only fecund way left is some kind of innovative blending and adequate restoration, which was an absurd factor in that limited world of rural Bengal, and here lies the thrust of the director in not being preachy and marching with the reality – reality, that was grim, cruel.



Days go on, and they are not able to earn anything except humiliation and utter frustration. Ghunu's little world of joy turns into fragmented pieces of vent despair when one day he notices Radha falling for the circus owner, *"Samba fights with the real tiger he is a real mard (male), unlike you."*

This makes him shattered and he says to Sibal that he won't teach any village boy tiger dance anymore, he will leave Nonpura. These pieces of conversation between Ghunuram and Sibal carry the entire significance of the film:

*"Uncle, most important of all is the respect you get. I even take the boss beating, but I do it only to spend a month in Nonpura and live like a man should. I come alive for a month. I feel worth something. That's why people turn to me and respect what I do, that is far more important than food and clothing....times have changed Uncle, our days are over...."*

*Sibal: I know you love Radha. I want you two to marry. I I want her to bear your child, a true tiger's son who won't admit defeat..... your ancestors fought with the British in the guise of tigers and you are running away??*

The declining popularity of Ghunu's tiger dance along with his declining state of life is symbolised by multiple sub-incidents, like the arrival of some city people for jungle safari, their blitzkrieg attacks on him, grounding him forcefully and clicking his helpless positions as a means of making him a laughing stock. The brilliant close shots and panning shots capturing his inner pain in various scenes like the ones being attacked by those city people and his helpless situation of utter humiliation, his pathetic, escaping run from their grasp, sitting alone on the river bank, the declining sun and its red, eventide hues reflected on his painted face, the homeward boat - all are highly allegorical and symbolic of that doom.



Buddhadeb Dasgupta has himself stated his purpose behind the making Bagh Bahadur in FORTNIGHT 1990, FEATURE FILM, 1H31:

*"As a filmmaker, I brook over a theme for years before it takes final shape. An idea comes and stays with me while I work on other projects which may or not may be related to it in some way. Bagh Bahadur is foreshadowed in Phera, Sheet Grishmer Smriti and even in a documentary made in 1973 on Khirode Nattya, a drummer who has become legendary in Bengal. At that time, the drummer was 104 years old and deaf but continued to compose new and never rhythmic sequences out of the sheer*

joy of creation. The players in all the films mentioned come as performers and have clear individual identities. At time, I have been able to merge myself in them. In *Bagh Bahadur*, the protagonist, Ghurunam is one of those folk performers who till the sixties were the mainstream performers in villages and in suburbs all over India. From the sixties, the concept of performing art, its ethics and values have undergone a thorough change. A confrontation has started taking place between traditional folk art and citified entertainment. The conflict is symbolised by Ghurunam. The traditional village Tiger Dancer is defeated but the drummer remains challengingly defiant. The Tiger Dance is still performed in less accessible parts of India. The setting is authentic and so is the costume, the form of the dance and the accompanying rhythm. The theme reflects a historical process in progress at the present time."



Ghunu's state of life, symbolising the conflict between tradition and modernity can be well compared to the content and treatment of the national award-winning Assamese film *Xagoroloi Bohu Door* (It's a Long Way to the Sea, 1995) by the acclaimed director Jahnu Barua. There, the protagonist's (Bishnu Kharghoria) only source of livelihood of working as a boatman met with an end with the construction of a bridge on the river.

Obvious worry of a terribly unsecured future with starving stomach made him mad and out of utter anguish, on that very night, when the bridge was inaugurated, he ran like an insane amidst torrential rain with his axe to cut the posts of bridge. He was not a bad person at all, but situation had made him go out of conscience for some time. His grandson is symbolised as the voice of conscience in the film, who was too close to the protagonist's heart.

Ghununam's sense of self-esteem got geared up by the words of Sibal Chacha, that he is not an escapist, not a coward, he bears the blood of bravehearts, and he would fight until his last breath: "*Radha, a man lives with his head high.*"

He enters into the cage to have one last fight of honour. He knew, in front of that ferocious leopard, his physical capacity does not second this fight, but for Ghunu, a death of honour was much better than a life of humiliation, as he repeatedly stated. Ghunu's mortal body surrenders to those wild paws, but not his self-esteem. It has lived head high, intact, undaunted. The stream of blood rolling down from the cage, carried the warmth of that esteem. Standing nearby, his constant companion, the vintage drummer was raising billowy waves in his drum in this man's honour. He was not mourning at this death, instead, it was a victory drum at the brave-heart's royal end. The potent Buddhadeb Dasgupta could have thought of any other animal instead of a Leopard to symbolise strength and challenge, but it was chosen as a symbol not only of strength, but of an allegorical force - a symbol of the dark side of urban emergence.

The One Last Dance.

"A man lives with his head high"- *Bagh Bahadur*.

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