

Tribute to Buddhadeb Dasgupta
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Buddhadeb Dasgupta's Poetry



A country boy stands in front of a church bell. The bell rings once...twice. "Dong...donngg..."

Long shot. A group of seven or eight strange-looking men appears in the distant horizon. On a sloping sand dune covered with scant grass and interspersed with Eucalyptus and Jhau, they walk in a strange, unfamiliar movement – with their slightly acrobatic feet and hands moving forward twice or three times, and then with a pause, their heads slowly swinging – resulting in a slow, uncanny dancing progress forward.

They are singing. A couple of them in the group are beating country drums. Somebody in the

back of the line is playing the flute. Almost all of the men in the group are wearing a strange, big, scary-looking mask. The men's heights are random in the line, creating a sense of broken conformity.

The boy watches them. Their movements, their masks, and their eerie song could seem scary for a child.

But the boy is not scared. He is quite amused to see them singing and dancing. Perhaps he knows them. Perhaps he likes them. Perhaps the men know him too. He smiles when the men slowly pass by, chanting their words that mesmerize him.

The men sing:

“Kalo jole kuchla tole
Dublo sanatan
Aj charana kaal charana
Pai je darashan ...”

“Sanatan drowned
in the black abyss of river
I get to see him only a quarter today
and a quarter tomorrow...”

The men in their strange, big masks walk by in their off-balance, mellifluous movement. The song fills the air. The country flute is the anchoring instrument. The drums lazily beat too. The flute fills the air, and envelops the song itself. The drums synchronize with the dance. It's a subdued song. It's a subdued dance. It is relaxed. It is done with a lot of time in hand, by the pre-decided, busy time standards of cinematography. It is done with extreme precision, and the brain behind the cameras knows exactly how much time should be spent on this musical sequence.

The cameras follow the men from different corners. They follow them in long shots. They follow them in close ups. Cameras hold an angle so that the men's walking forward appears to be along an uphill slope. There are uphill slopes. And there are downhills.

The boy is silhouetted underneath the slope, against the background of a small, brick house. The house is the church where the boy lives. He is an orphan, taken in by the country pastor.

In a minute and a half, the group of dancing and singing men in their masks disappears into the woods.

The story goes on.

Many of us Indian movie enthusiasts talk about maestros such as Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Tapan Sinha, Shyam Benegal, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Ketan Mehta, or M.S. Sathyu. We know about Ray's *Apu Trilogy*. We know about his *Calcutta Trilogy*. We know Ritwik's celebrated *Cloud-Capped Star*, and the *Golden River*. Who doesn't know *Ankur*, *Nishant*, or *Manthan*? Who

hasn't seen *Mirch Masala*? Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta-71*, *Interview*, or *Bhuban Som*? Who did not savor Tapan Sinha's Tagore masterpieces the *Guest*, the *Kabul Man*, or *Hungry Stone*? They are unforgettable, incredibly rich creations that Bengali and Indian audience, and in case of Ray, Sen and Ghatak, an international audience, are much familiar with.

Meanwhile, we overlook another giant named Buddhadeb Dasgupta. A giant filmmaker. And a fantastic poet.

Although, among Bengali film buffs, he is often fondly called the Last of the Great Masters. In one of the trips to Kolkata, I had a precious opportunity to meet him.

Since returning to New York, I have been watching Dasgupta's films, one after another, and I am rediscovering this genius over and over again. I don't know how many people in or outside Bengal have carefully followed Dasgupta's creations over the years, but to me, they all seem to be artistic masterpieces, with their modernism, subtlety, and sublime cinematography.

The subjects he chose for his stories. The characters he made. The shots he selected. His fantastic, surreal long shots and very long shots. The screenplays he wrote. The music he used. The passion he exploited. The drama he extracted. The sadness he welled out of our hearts and eyes. The ends he ended his stories with. The metaphors he imagined.

They are all poignant, powerful, and yes, poetry.



To be honest, my first experience with Buddhadeb's cinema was not really what I can call exciting. It was *Neem Annapurna* (the Bitter Morsel), story of a destitute family of four – a routinely unemployed, sickly father, his perpetually-starving wife, and their

two daughters, the younger of them always hungry and looking for crumbs in neighbors' apartments where she wouldn't mind stealing the pet parrot's food dropping from the cage. The older girl has just reached puberty, and we knew before long, she would be victim of much older local men's lust. The couple was migrants fleeing starvation and unemployment in the countryside, and came to the city of Kolkata – only to realize they were forever thrown in a vicious cycle of poverty and hopelessness. For them, there was no way to get out of their misery. They succumb. They surrender to starvation and dejection. And then, they surrender to dishonesty, only to save themselves from death.

They have no choice.

Honestly, back in those days, perhaps in early seventies, in Kolkata we had so much fantastic, fabulous cinema that a tale of an extremely poor, unattractive-looking family with their hunger and greed for whatever could be found and salvaged, and their fate that the younger girl would be run over by a car and the teenager would fall prey to local men – did not entice me. Even though we agreed with friends' observation that the scrawny, pathetic-looking father was an incredibly powerful actor. That was all we agreed on. That was the first time we noticed there were some actors and actresses – totally unknown to the film world we knew – who mastered the art of acting. That was Sunil Mukherjee, the father. Having known nothing from the outside, we decided they must have come from the theater world. Otherwise, how could they act so well?

We of course had Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta 71* and Ritwik Ghatak's last film *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo* (Logic, Debate and Stories) happening at the same time. Satyajit Ray was creating his grandiose, celebrated Adversary and Company Limited and the *Middleman*, where Dhritiman Chatterjee, Barun Chanda and Pradip Mukherjee were taking our breaths away. Compared to these masterpieces, Buddhadev Dasgupta's *Neem Annapurna* seemed repetitious, redundant...and perhaps a little bit too unnecessarily traumatic. Satyajit Ray portrayed poverty too in *Pather Panchali*, but look how

artistically the poverty was done! Look at Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*: how "beautifully" Neeta died! Remember the scene where once-destitute Anil Chatterjee comes back from Bombay, now a big singing star. He was lip-singing A. Kanan Hansadhwani. Breathtaking!

Back in those days, we the alternative film buffs wanted to see alternative, but not too much alternative. We were not ready for realism so real that it would actually cause us pain. We didn't have much of an idea about modernism, post-modernism, or any such terminology or genre. To us, sentiment was the only measurable attribute: something we could touch and feel. We could cry with it. And then, be happy about it, without any afterthought.



Buddhadeb Dasgupta, to me, is an amazing treasure trove – one that I never had an opportunity to explore, until now. I watched his *Dooratwa* (the Distance) with Pradip Mukherjee and Mamata Shankar going through an irreconcilable divorce and their little child is suffering because of it. I watched *Charachar* (the Distant Horizon) two or three times where Rajit Kapoor and Sadhu Meher caught birds and sold them – Sadhu matter-of-factly and Rajit with extreme reluctance; it is one of the most beautiful pro-environment, pro-nature movies I have ever seen in my life. I went back and saw *Laal Darja* (the Red Door), *Uttara* (A woman named Uttara) and *Phera* (the Return) a number of times each. And his final two years of filmmaking, when he made *Tope* (the Bait), and *Urojahaj* (the Airplane). *Urojahaj*'s story and the metaphor of ghosts one last time quickly identified

realism, magic realism, and surrealism in Buddhadeb's films.



In Kolkata, just before I returned to New York, I had a precious opportunity to watch a special show of *Anwar Ka Ajab Kissa* (the Bizarre Tale of Anwar), an absolutely magical, marvelous film that the producers for some unknown reasons decided not to release on the market. All of these movies received high accolades at international film festivals. And I made a point to watch a number of times some of his short films too: *Arjun* (An Arjun Tree), the *Rail Station*, etc. The shorts he made using Rabindranath Tagore's poems. I wish I had a way to see all his movies, and that too, on theater screens, to get the full cinema effects. A few years ago, my wife and I watched *Manda Meyer Upakhyay* (Tale of a Bad Woman) sitting in our Brooklyn home, which I got on a CD from Calcutta. I don't think anybody in India had ever made a movie on the sex worker women and their children, with so much realism and yet, humanism.

I have found bliss, watching Buddhadeb, just the same way I had once found bliss watching Ray, Ghatak, Sen, Sinha, or Benegal. Dasgupta's movies get me hooked. I get haunted. I get high. With a newly-acquired taste to appreciate narratives done so meticulously on the celluloid -- stories that are neither sentimental nor melodramatic, his films make me feel some strange, unknown kind of love for his characters. He overwhelms me with his extraordinary, and a rather awkward way of storytelling.

I feel compassion for the dentist in *Laal Darja* – the otherwise affluent man played by an often-overlooked great actor Subhendu Chattopadhyay – whose inability to cope either with his wife or son

saddens me. As if the dentist is me, or a man who could easily have been me. As if he is carrying his pain through all the men like me – some real, some fictitious, but could be real too. An urban man, who fails to understand why in spite of all his wealth and professional success, he is such a failure at home. And how come, in spite of all the financial handicaps, his car driver is so happy and content, with two wives he spends time alternately, and a newly-acquired girlfriend? What is the mystery?

The dentist is awed. He asks his driver, "*Tell me, how do you manage to do all this?*"

The driver smiles a shy, mysterious smile: "*Well, there is something, Sir. You wouldn't understand.*"



The affluent man, on the other hand, is turning like a stone. He confesses to his psychiatrist, "*When I have sex with my wife, I feel like my hands and legs are turning into stones. My wife cries out in fear and pain.*" His son, who studies out of a school hostel far away from home, does not even want to talk to his father. The dentist's wife, gradually losing relationship with her husband, now sees an old lover. That makes the dentist angry. He wants to hire a professional killer to kill the lover. But he is not even able to execute the plan. He gives up on it. He is not really up to it, either. As Dasgupta later wrote in one of his poetic essays for a Bengali newspaper, "*That was the Kolkata then where so much anger did not well up its throat.*"

So, this dentist – all those new, complicated mysteries of life, and all those unresolved issues, are slowly killing him from the inside. He sees

nightmares. He cries out in pain. He wants to live a normal life. Normality eludes him.

In his dreams, he goes back to his childhood. His father returns from work on his bicycle, riding on the hilly, lush green terrain. Where it rains all the time. Where it is never dry. The boy waits for his father, and shows him his new, precious find. It's a lady bug carefully enclosed in his fist. He tells his father, "Look, I know a magic." He opens his fist and chants quietly, "Tiny little bug...tiny little bug...open the red door...open the red door." And to his father's amazement, the red gate on the hilly track actually cracks open.



In *Uttara*, two wrestlers wrestle most of the day, every single day. That is their passion. That is their ego. That is their pastime. Nobody watches them. Nobody cheers. They are isolated from civilization. But they are encased in it, and satisfied with it. Then, upon insistence of an old aunt, one of the men goes back to his ancestral village, marries Uttara, and brings her back. Then, feud begins between the two wrestlers: each of them wants to have the woman, as they must share everything they possess in their alienated lives. Uttara must give in, against her will. Meanwhile, criminals with help from local men who are always angry that a Christian church is so popular, destroys the church and burns the pastor to death, making the little boy we spoke about before – orphan again. The pastor is the one who took him in, and brought him up. Where does the little boy go now?

The folk dancers and musicians take him in. They save him from danger. But they could not save Uttara. She becomes the victim of the criminals' lust.

The boy weeps inconsolably. He is mired in greed and violence. He is trapped.

Are the folk dancers real? Are they some type of a metaphor? Are they alive? Are they not? And the wrestlers? They keep wrestling away in their isolated world, while death marches out on one side of the terrain, and life marches in on the other side. Extreme long shot, slowly zooms in to show the boy one last time, weeping for the woman who loved him so much. Buddhadeb Dasgupta effortlessly blends in reality, magical realism, and surrealism.

Every major film Dasgupta made – *Uttara*, *Neem Annapurna*, *Lal Darja*, *Phera*, *Kalpurush* (Memories in the Mist), or *Dooratwa* – has talked about children. Even though the child is not the central character, but the story somehow revolves around them. Is the child Buddhadeb himself? Is it how he wants to see the world, with all its traumas and complications and sadness that a child should not go through, but does? The teenage girl in the Tale of a Bad Woman is trapped in a fateful life of prostitution that her mother is engaged in. Can she escape that destiny? There must be someone who can help to break the violent, vicious cycle. The young woman in this case is lucky: her schoolteacher who taught her geography and arithmetic helps her out of the sad world -- to flee. But what about the others? What about the other children who simply cannot make it? What about the grown-ups like the dentist who is so desperate to go back to his childhood, but cannot? What about the bird-catcher in *Charachar* (Distant Horizon) who in adult body carries the mind of a child – pained to see the free birds trapped, and caged, and sold, and sometimes eaten too? He suffers from unbearable pain to see their pain.

Is Buddhadeb Dasgupta crying out in pain, and drawing our attention to it? Is it that he is asking us to do something about the state of our being, which is turning the world into a very difficult, unhappy place for our children to live? Is he trying to tell us that innocence and simplicity are being forcibly taken away from us, and that we must do something about it?

Who must talk about the sadness of the child of his divorced parents? Sadness of children whose parents could not feed them well, or keep them safe?

Pain and sorrow of an orphan child whose only refuge is now burnt down by criminals? Or, a child who grew up on the green, lush, rainy hill spending his adult life in the city – forlorn, isolated, and unloved -- like a prisoner? Dasgupta paints his pictures through the naïve, innocent, dreamy eyes of a child. The child cannot seem to understand why the world is suddenly so difficult, so painful, and so cruel. They don't know the answer. They are confused, terrified, and sad. We the viewers of his films are intimately sucked in, as if we are those children in his movies. We cannot separate ourselves from his characters. We become a part of his celluloid canvas and easel.

With his camera used as a paintbrush, he writes, and he draws a powerful, poignant piece of art. The art is subtle. It is never loud. The pain is suppressed. It is never screaming. The sorrow touches our hearts deep inside. Even if we cry, we cry silently. As if in solemn respect for the men, women and children portrayed in his films. They are carrying their pain so silently: how can we the onlookers be loud about it?



Yes, even when the story is not about a child, such as *Anwar Ka Ajab Kissa*, the young man – Anwar a confused, unsuccessful adult in his late twenties or early thirties who works as a quite inept, if not miserable, sleuth – shows traits of a child. He works as a private detective, but he does not want to fulfil his missions. He does not want to. He gets tangled up with the men and women he is investigating on, breaking any norms of professionalism. He sings and dances with his dog. The dog is his only possession. His love of life has long deserted him, and is now married to another man far away. Anwar has no way to get her back. He meets her, and begs, and implores to return. Does she have any love left for him? Maybe, she does: she pauses,

looks in his eyes, and opens up her blouse for a moment. She shows her heart to him, for once. Then, in sadness, she looks down, turns back, and goes away, perhaps forever.

Is it happening in real-life? Who knows! Is it happening in a dream? We don't know. It doesn't even matter. Buddhadeb Dasgupta brings us back and forth – throughout his stories – between reality and fantasy, and we do not know where the boundary between them falls. We stay with him, and we drift with him. We go wherever he takes us. It is a beautiful, fantastic flight across the sky. It is a wonderful journey across the realms of joy and sorrow, would-be and would-not-be, truth and fiction, reality and abstraction.

We fall in love with Anwar. We fall in love with Uttara. We fall in love with the little boy with the red bug wrapped in his fist. We fall in love with the two destitute girls who we know would soon perish. We fall in love with the six-year-old whose parents got divorced because of a pre-marriage tragedy the mother had to go through. We adore the country boy who is completely taken over by the folk dancers wearing animal masks. We feel so passionately about the teenage daughter of the prostitute who wants to live a dignified life. We are so drawn to the little boy in *Phera* whose father died, and he is looking for a father figure he can put his trust in. Could the decadent, failed country drama actor assume that role?

Buddhadeb's magnet powerfully attracts us.

His camera frames are structured, only to break the structures and conventions and norms of contemporary cinema. His music creates pathos: it is absolutely beautiful, yet never loud, and never surpasses the story. His characters never say too much. In fact, many of them are almost silent. As if all his characters are somewhat shy, embarrassed of their situation, and withdrawn.

Buddhadeb Dasgupta creates a world for us that is modern and contemporary, yet at the same time, miles away from the loudness and cacophony of the world we live in. His treatment of his cinematic materials – from his music to his footage to his editing

to his acting to his long shots and close ups – are all one of a kind.

I asked Dasgupta why children are always such an integral part of his film. I asked him why there is always such a melancholy so easily perceived. He replied, *“Look, our childhood is such a critically important part of our lives. A child who grew up happy sees the world so differently from one who went through enormous pain and suffering. The formative years are so precious. A happy child is an optimist. A child who was not fortunate to find happiness in his early years sees the world with pessimism when they grow up.”*

The above is my paraphrasing of what he said in Bengali. But that was the essence. And it resonated with me deeply. In my own North Calcutta days, my childhood friends and I played down the dusty, dingy ally. We didn't have anything we could call luxury: a rubber ball would cost thirty paisa, and that was our entire world. A broken cricket bat, and wickets made out of stacked-up bricks stolen from the site of a half-built house. Yet, that childhood was so beautiful, and so happy! In this fiercely increasing materialist world, where today's children must have every possible luxury – the cell phone and round-the-clock Internet and video games and birthday cakes and newer dresses and every other possible material pleasure, the bliss of a simple, dreamy childhood is itself a matter of the past. The simple, sweet sound of mother's evening conch-shell blow. The soft and subtle ringing of the brass bell of the neighborhood priest making his daily round. The jasmine flower vendor calling out the young girls in our alley who are waiting for him to show up in mid-monsoon. A North Kolkata rickshaw puller carries a small child, or an old

woman, from their waterlogged home. Happiness was all-pervasive. We didn't have to buy happiness. It was free. It was for us to have. To rub gently over our bodies and minds. It was for us to savor, without even noticing we were savoring it.



Happiness was always there -- like a parent's envelope of love.

Dasgupta's cinema, like epic poetry – story after story, and chapter after chapter – reminds us of the preciousness of our childhood. It reminds us that we are still children deep inside. His creations softly and subtly invite us to live our lives, the way an innocent child does it. With full of love, with wide open eyes to admire and cherish our magical surroundings. It is the ultimate sense of holy and pure – one we can only find in God.

Watching his movies over and over again, I return to my childhood. It is an experience that makes me pure again.

His poetry – his film – is pure bliss.

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