

First Kalpanirjhar Annual Lecture



Aparna Sen in Conversation with Samik Bandyopadhyay

The First Kalpanirjhar Annual Lecture was held on 1st April 2009 at the Max Mueller Bhavan, Kolkata. The lecture was presented by the Kalpanirjhar Foundation and Goethe-Institut, Kolkata and sponsored by Vivada



Cruises. It was an evening titled “Aparna Sen in conversation with Shamik Bandyopadhyay”. The renowned film director talked about some thoughts behind making her type of films, the importance of the existence of a parallel cinema movement and condemned the homogenisation of Indian cultures that is continuously done by Bollywood.

SB: A few months ago, we were there together for the release of the last book by Chidananda Dasgupta and one of the issues we discussed in the panel was the major change that has happened since Chiduda and his contemporaries started the Calcutta Film Society and had also launched, in a sense, the New Indian Cinema of the 50s, 60s and 70s. We also talked about how you came into that scenario and carried on that tradition in your films. You were very much a part and extension of that movement. And now when we look around us, the situation has so radically changed with the growth of commercial cinema – the ‘Bombay Cinema’ – with which there had been a running fight, a fight of assertion, a fight of establishing a different kind of imagination. All of that has gone haywire. Now, a whole different scene has come into play with the valorization of ‘Bombay Cinema’ at the cost of those individual, original voices drawing on the different cultures of India. I would like to ask you how you survived in it and made your own place in this situation. Has it forced you at any point to change to consciously make a shift from the things that you were doing under compulsion?

AS: I can only say that I have managed to survive with great difficulty. Because it is very difficult to get the kind of funding we need for my kind of cinema. The kind of cinema I make is essentially meant for film lovers and there are a large number of them if you count all the film lovers in the world. But the point is in order to make your film acceptable to film lovers all over the world, it’s very important that our films sell internationally because the market in Bengal is small. So, when we make films in Bengali, we have to look to an international audience because there will otherwise be no returns for the kind of money that is being spent for making films.

But the problem is that a certain amount of production values are required for that and I would say rather high production values are required because cinema all over the world has become technically brilliant. But we are not able to do that. We are not able to afford equipments. We are not able to spend the kind of time that is required to achieve those production values. So you remain somewhere in the middle. That is why, I have relied very heavily on my scripts. Rather than on technical innovations, I have relied on human relationships, emotional connects.

What I find difficult today Shamikda in the light of what you were saying, is that earlier there was a mainstream cinema and there were other kinds of cinema in the regional areas, both mainstream and art house, but they could all co-exist. And

it is important that all kinds of cinema co-exist because no film industry can survive only on art house cinema. So much as I love art house cinema, I still feel that all kinds of cinema should co-exist. But today what has happened is that mainstream cinema, what is popularly called Bollywood, has co-opted all our ethnic diversities and given to the Indian identity a construct that was not there originally. This construct comes out of mainstream Indian cinema and largely, you'll find that this kind of cinema is peopled by North Indian Hindu males. You have other kinds of people but often it is just tokenism. I'm reminded of the time when I went to America to take a couple of classes at MIT and one at Wellesley. And I remember that it was at Wellesley, one of the girls said that she was going to a fancy dress party. I asked what she was dressing as. She said, "I am going in an Indian dress." So, I asked her, "What is an Indian dress? There is no one pan-Indian dress like there is nothing called a pan-Indian music." She said, "Oh! I am dressing up like Aishwarya Rai in Devdas." So, that has become "Indian" dress for a majority of NRIs. And I can understand where that comes from Shamikda – we all have a great need for roots, a nostalgia for our roots. When Indians migrated abroad, the nostalgia for their roots lay very much grounded in mainstream Indian Cinema with all the songs, which were a part of their childhood. That's all they were subjected to. So, that has become their roots. There's no denying it and this has been used by universities. I've been to SOAS where they teach Indian popular cinema. They call it Bollywood. The same thing has happened with popular studies in MIT. In fact, you have classes of Hindi film dancing. So that's the construct I am not terribly happy about.

SB: I liked it when you said 'my kind of cinema'. So you are always aware of your kind of cinema and you would still like to do your kind of cinema rather than the Indian kind of cinema as it is being constructed every day. I have a little bit of problem when you say that for the Indians in the US, the Bombay Cinema was the only experience, the only nostalgia that they cherish and so they would like to relate to that. Don't you also think that its part of a larger politics - the politics of turning the whole community, the whole nation and even the whole world towards consumerism - where you should not be concerned with local experiences, immediate experiences. For there are quite a lot of new films and plays that make sense of striking experiences about suffering such as suffering at a very local place, about a single culture, a single experience. Now deny that. Brush it aside. And imagine an entire lot of people who would just be prepared to buy and buy like mad. So, I don't think it's just an adoration or a celebration of a lost world of a

nostalgia but a completely fresh construction which is part of a global phenomena where in India too, the more you get immersed in the fan fare of the Bombay Cinema, your kind of cinema becomes irrelevant. That becomes pushed aside...

AS: Marginalized, yes...

SB: Because with your kind of cinema, people get concerned, people get anxious, people get bored and they just can't walk out to buy.

AS: It just reminds me of a little anecdote. I remember it was in Pune. There was a film festival there. 15 Park Avenue was screened in one of the shows. Somebody saw it and then came up to me and then said, "Good film, good film. Not exactly Friday night entertainment." So what everyone wants is Friday night entertainment. In fact, I like to call it "instant coffee culture". This is what I find – the moment you have to think a little bit, you say, "Oh God! It's a bore."

I remember once while watching a film of Kiarostami and one of our friends went upstairs and came back after 10 minutes and said, "Oh my God! He was in the car when I went upstairs and he is still in the car?" You know, there is no patience at all. Then there was another friend who was very depressed and I thought that it would be nice if I could show her a film. She said, "What film?" So, I said, "Let's watch Seven Samurai. I mean I always cheer when I watch it." And she said, "What? A black & white film with subtitles. Forget it." This is what I find to be the common syndrome in watching the kind of cinema that I love. This is what happens.

SB: Another question. In the kind of cinema that we love and you make, even when you began in the context of the setting of New Indian Cinema which had a very strong root in realism and the local reality - which the more authentic you made, the deeper you probed – became an experience which even other people could share and could recognize as different but real, and very powerfully, emotionally real. You have that strong sense of the real, historically located, in your early films – in films like 36 Chowringhee Lane and Parama – set quite solidly in a culture. There are two different cultures in 36 Chowringhee Lane and Parama but very clear, definable cultures. At the same time, right from the beginning, there was a desire to go beyond the real, to break the real into dreams, into the surreal. Why did it come? Did it come as a kind of dissatisfaction with the limits of the real –

the 'real' that really didn't let you think or break through and get entangled there and get lost.

AS: You know when I write or when I am making films, I don't find myself thinking very consciously. It's often a kind of subconscious process. It's not something that I very clearly think but I do realize that when I am dealing with everyday reality, I find that there are certain limits to everyday reality. I like to ground my films in everyday reality often but I like to take off from there to underline an emotion or reach a certain transcendence. Even in 36 Chowringhee Lane which is very well grounded in reality, I think at the end when you have Ms Stoner walking off and reciting from Lear, the reason was I wanted to have a scene that would reach a certain transcendence. It's not a common everyday reality to see a woman in the middle of the night walking down Victoria Memorial, reciting Shakespeare. I have never seen that happening. That's not part of my experience of reality. But that was something that I constructed out of my imagination because I felt that it was a point when everyday reality should kind of lifted onto another plane. I have done that often and dreams are a wonderful way of doing that. I have done that in 36 Chowringhee Lane, where I remember my producer Shashi Kapoor saying, "Why are you looking for a seaside? I mean it's a dream. It can be anywhere, you can construct a set. So I said, 'You know the point of it is that it should look absolutely real and yet it shouldn't be real. I mean when she walks out of that door, there's the sea. That's when you get the dream content.'

So, I have used dreams to try and bring out her emotions, her suppressed sexuality which is triggered of by seeing the attractive young man Samaresh who, in a way, flirts with her very mildly. It triggers memories of her lost love and I think there is a lot of suppressed sexuality in her like in every human being. In fact, I had tried to make Ms Stoner a very virginal kind of a person who often pulled her dressing down. Everything about her was very modest and virginal. It's only in the dream that the sexuality was allowed to be expressed in the kind of bizarre makeup that she wears. When she is dressed as a bride, she's an old aged lady dressed as a bride and heavily made up, wearing black stockings which traditionally symbolizes the "fallen" woman, the "wanton" woman. She is wearing those and she slowly lifts her dress to reveal her stockings. These are the areas where I felt you can't use everyday reality to express these emotions and not be vulgar... But you can use a dream.

SB: Recently I was at a conference in Pune where scriptwriters

from Bombay, from the illustrious Gulzar down to even the recent ones, had come together and we were having an exchange with them and I found it very strange that most of the new directors of the Bombay Cinema, don't even care to read the original text when they adapt from a novel or any other literary source. There was Vishal Bharadwaj who told us very honestly that he had seen *The Throne of Blood* by Akira Kurosawa long ago and it was the first time that he felt that Shakespeare had so much blood of thunder. He had always felt that Shakespeare was too stolid. So, he had to see that and then he forgot it. Later he read a four-page prose version of *Macbeth* and said, "Fine, this is a wonderful story." He went and handed over the story to the scriptwriter of the film, who did the work for him and you had *Maqbool*.

AS: I thought Vishal wrote his own scripts.

SB: No. So, that was quite interesting. There was another occasion in Delhi when we were discussing Mahasweta Devi's *Rudaali* and she was also there, and people were complaining about how the film was not faithful to the original, etc. And then suddenly, we discovered that Gulzar was sitting in the last row. Somebody had the bright idea of calling Gulzar over and he said, "Sorry, I haven't read the story. So, I can't say whether it matches the story or not. The director had given me a story and I wrote the script. And she had also decided the location for me and I worked out the script accordingly."

So, that's one way of making films but in your case, when you are doing your own scripts, a lot of serious writing goes into the process for a long time before you go into making the film or even casting actors and actresses. It is a long exercise every time and that I believe is one of the reasons why you do not make too many films. It is not just the producers but also this put together. So, I would like to ask how you start thinking about a film. In some cases, it looks like it was an issue or several issues together which you wanted to address and then the film started growing out of that. In other cases, was it the seed of the story in your mind?

AS: It happens in different ways. It could be a very simple thing like going to a "shraddha", a funeral. This was what happened in *Paromitar Ek Din*. I went to a funeral of a friend of my father's whom I called uncle. He had married for the second time and both his wives were there. The second wife was sitting with the children and going through all the rituals. And the first wife (the divorced wife) was sitting in one of the benches and crying. A lot

of people were going up to the first wife and consoling her. Suddenly the thought came to me – who is the real widow? And then I started thinking that when do human relationships end? Is it the signing of a paper that ends a human relationship? What happens to the remnants of feelings? And I forgot about it. Then it surfaced after some days. It obviously works somewhere deep inside me. Like most creative people, you get certain stimuli and that kind of nurtures within you and then it expresses itself in a story. But for Mr & Mrs Iyer, I was all set to write a love story which was going to be set in a journey because I think an external journey makes a wonderful metaphor for an internal journey. But obviously, ever since the demolition of the Babri Masjid, I had deeply perturbed about the communal problems in our country and that somehow worked itself into the film. I will often start telling the story and in the telling, the story grows. It happens in various kinds of ways. Often, I have to do a lot of research. For example, I did a lot of research for Sati. Whenever there is something for which I need research, I do it.

SB: In the case of Jugant, for example, did it begin with the issues because there are so many issues in several planes, in so many levels?

AS: Actually what happened with Jugant was this. Often I get images in my mind, images without a story. In Jugant, I used to get an image of a husband and wife quarrelling. We will never be able to bring the intimacy of a quarrel between a husband and a wife into our kind of cinema in India. For instance, they could be undressing and fighting. They could be completely naked and fighting. But that is not something that I can show. That nudity would not be titillating. It would not be anything that would be provocative in any way. It would be something that would bespeak intimacy and being used to each other. But that is not something I can ever show. But that's how it started, that's how it grew. And then other issues started coming in. Obviously, I am not aware that I am thinking about these issues. I may think about them in other levels. I may write about them in editorials. I may talk about them with friends or somewhere else or I may write about them in an article. But I am not thinking about those issues when I am actually writing a script. What happens is that insidiously they work their way in.

SB: So, would you call that your activism because you had been an activist on several important issues like political, environmental, women's rights at different points of your career. Do you make

a distinction then between your individual activist role and your role as a film-maker?

AS: Yes, I do. For a long time, I was the editor of Sananda and I wrote a lot of editorials where I expressed my concerns about all that was happening around us. And I expressed them quite fearlessly and very explicitly. But I have never tried to do that in cinema because I have never wanted to use cinema as a platform for preaching. I dislike cinema that is preachy and I don't think it ultimately has any effect on anyone. What actually does have an impact is if you can make an emotional connect. That is the only thing that finally stays with you. For example, in Mr & Mrs Iyer, I am not rubbing the fact in your face that the male protagonist is a Muslim and the female protagonist is a Hindu. It is a part of the story. At the end of the day, you feel sad that a Hindu woman has to get separated from a Muslim man. The fact that you are feeling sad is what I had wanted to achieve.

SB: Now another question which grows beyond the Bombay cinema, which we started as a point of departure or a point of reference, is that there is a kind of a construction of a myth and often, there are scholars, particularly in the new film studies academia, where they try to read in Bombay Cinema the Mahabharata and the Ramayana or the myth of Mother India, which was a creation of the nationalist period. All these seem to be reflected in the Bombay Cinema and I often find it to be an over-reading. It's a mis-reading, it is like trying to give a validity to it which it does not have whereas there is a lot of energy in the myths. And India, considering whatever has been happening now, has shown great resilience in handling the myths of different traditions all over the country.

AS: Absolutely

SB: Common people as well as scholars have enjoyed great freedom in re-casting the myths which really can have a meaning beyond the local and the original. Have you ever thought of this use of the myth?

AS: Yes. But before I answer that, what is wonderful about our mythology to me is that they are not representational. There are metaphors within metaphors within metaphors. That constitutes the beauty of our mythology. But, here I would like to make it clear that my intention is not to do Bollywood bashing here. When you see the Sippys and the Chopras making Ramayana and

Mahabharata, you feel the limitation of imagination. You see 'calendar art' happening in front of you. I remember when we were young, all of my siblings had a different Sita, a different Ravana. Now you can't think of anybody except Dipika, who played Sita in the TV series, as Sita. Everybody's Sita is Dipika. But when you watch Peter Brooks' Mahabharata, you don't get that feeling at all because here, you suddenly have a white Krishna or a blonde Arjun. You don't have calendar art. And what bothers me very much is that Hindu fundamentalists have co-opted our epics. I find that really frightening. Because then you are made to believe that the first Ramayana was written by Tulsidas. That's probably what they think. Whereas the first Ramayana, I think, was written in Nepal if I remember correctly. Nobody bothers to do any study of history. I don't think any of them read the Ramayana and the Mahabharata beyond the Amar Chitra Katha. So nobody really knows what there is.

SB: Ramanujam spoke of the 300 Ramayana ...A huge fuss was made about it.

AS: That's right. And the Vishwa Hindu Parishad students came and beat up the dean who just used it as a text.

This is a very frightening state of affairs because what is wonderful about our Ramayana and the Mahabharata is the 'telling' and the 'retelling'. And every time changes are incurred because there is no one single poet. Everybody puts in his or her bit. And from there, it becomes truly Indian because of the diversity that goes into it. So my dream is to do a version of the Ramayana based on Sita, the way she sees it and to show the cultural colonization of the first peoples of that place. I wouldn't do it the Sippy way or the Chopra way. I would use people from all over the world like Australian aborigines, American Indians and tribal people from our country and use them as the first peoples who are then colonized by the Caucasians, whom I would refer as the whites because that is what has happened. And I would use the future as an antidote to the past which is referred to in Ramayana as "many many thousands of years ago". I would rather say, "Many many thousands of years in the future, there would be a country called Vietnam". Why cannot I be a poet of the Ramayana as anybody else? I think I have the legitimate right to do that. I think the Ramayana belongs to the whole of south-east Asia. What I am very concerned about and what I feel everyone should oppose is the way Indian identity has been co-opted by Bollywood.

I am very frightened of this because I think that

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the essence of our identity lies in our diversity. And that is being taken away. Our folk culture and traditions are being completely homogenized by Bollywood. There are many brilliant music directors who have borrowed liberally from folk songs. As a result of this, the folk songs have lost the vigor, the naiveté, the innocence. They are then given a kind of Bollywood construct.... If you ask anybody to sing a song, they will sing a Hindi film song.... You come across these antakshari games where everybody sings Hindi film songs. This is shocking because India is a country of rich musical diversity. We no longer can see anything like Yakshagana or Kathakali....

SB: I think we close our evening with this concern that we have been sharing and I hope something of that will be carried with you from here.