

Film Review**Pradip Biswas****Revisiting Rafeeq Illias' Tribute-Film on *Fat Mama***

The Legend of Fat Mama is an investigative film made by Rafeeq Illias on the Chinese community, known as China Town, situated at Tangra, Kolkata and specially for "Fat Mama", the legendary maker of delicious noodles. China Town is famous for "yum yum noodles" the genesis of which could be traced in the huge role played by Fat Mama, a hard struggling woman, and instrumental for making China Town a rendezvous of millions of Chinese food lovers of the city. Said Rafeeq Illias: "There can be no existence of Kolkata sans the mention of China Town, made famous by 'Fat Mama' in the post independent India. This is one area where a huge constellation of Chinese community came to settle a couple of centuries ago and still continue to make a living now."

The Legend of Fat Mama, made for the BBC, has already been beamed in India and earned huge applause for the nostalgia it spawns in the wake of vast change transforming

the city of Kolkata since the Indo-China conflict in 1962. It is the moods and passions, memoirs and love for the old city of Calcutta the bulk of Chinese community came to live in as their own land. And Rafeeq Illias makes no bones about the fact that the very Chinese community, settled long, long ago in the fringe of old Calcutta, was harassed, questioned, doubted and tortured by the authority in powers in India following the sudden Indo-China clash in 1962. It may be mentioned, the director keeps his focus on the attitude and perceptions of the vast Chinese community once headed by the Fat Mama, the wizard of gourmet of noodles.

While flipping through the buzz-frames of the film, one immediately is charmed by the visual of quotidian Chinese life and their present degradation into poor status in the city. Said the director: "The lady who lives in the 60s and 70s in Calcutta's China Town and introduced the city to the Chinese food, the Chinese New year with which the film begins and ends and also Indo-Chinese relations in general".

It is needless to mention, the elegiac portrait of China Town in late fifties/early sixties Rafeeq Illias has sketched in the film is so much true and this critic (a student of the Scottish Church College then) could easily visualize back what really happened to the Chinese community of China Town, in the wake of Indo-China conflict. And since we have a lot of Chinese college-mates in the Scottish Church College, I could recall, how we were inspired by our eminent College teachers to stand by them in times of attacks and unrest, created by the henchmen of those political

leaders, hostile to the innocent Chinese community. The film naturally reveals, through a spate of straight camera interviews of the octogenarian Chinese people, who narrate how many of their relatives were forced to live Calcutta and India due to false notion and revenge, triggered off by Indo-China conflict.



It may be mentioned, Mrinal Sen, too, made a film called *Neel Aakash Neechey* (Under the Blue Sky), produced by the famous music director and singer Hemant Kumar in the year 1959, which was banned for a couple of months in the wake of Indo-China war as the protagonist of the film is Wang Loo, a Chinese peddler, an honest soul, simultaneously raising voice against the British rules. In his angry reaction Mrinal Sen said: "The film tells of a Chinese hawker in the streets of Calcutta during the most atrocious days of British rule, of our people's glorious fight for freedom and lastly of how the Chinese hawker, simple and honest as he was, reacted to the call from across the Himalayan borders asking all the democratic forces all over the world (and the overseas Chinese in particular) to come forward and resist the then Japanese militarist aggression". Mrinal Sen felt through all these it was the film's intention to seek a

bigger truth: "our national struggle for freedom is inseparably linked up with the liberal world's struggle against imperialism."

In *The Legend of Fat Mama*, we come across Stella, the owner of a Chinese provision store, remembers Fat Mama, how delicious and yummy her noodles were and how a whole bowl would only cost "four annas". Also is recounted the anecdote of Paul, another China Town dweller, about the Fat Mama who could create a sense of wonder by serving each customer not only with her superb noodles but also with personal magnetic touch of affection and feelings for them. One feels so nostalgic when the director captures and presents street foods, vanishing family-run eateries, *mah-jong clubs*, a historic Chinese printing press, on the verge of closure and ordinary and dynamic life-style of the left-out Chinese community who still makes the old city their own home land. The film also traces with remorse how many old-guards had to shift to Toronto and live there, eke out their living by making the same kind of "noodles" the Fat Mama used to prepare with a magic flavour. The film presents the Fat Mama as a challenger to patriarchy too. For she helped dissolve the borders between genders in China Town.

In his humble tone Rafeeq Illias noted: "We often think of the Parsees as a minority but the Chinese are even more decimated and marginalized in our society". What is more important for him is to seize the passing history of such a rare fading community, anchored to the old city, with a human passion and warmth. The Legend of Fat Mama is only a truth realized in the visual frames, showing in its wake a fading community, very much part of our city and the country.

Mr. Pradip Biswas is a former Member of Fipresci-India, based in Kolkata.