

Tribute

Shoma A. Chatterji

## Chidananda Dasgupta



The name “Chidananda Dasgupta” evokes more reverence than awe among film buffs, scholars and critics who know him, either through his writing, or directly as a person, or, through those rare occasions when he agreed to speak at a panel discussion on cinema. He was the most incisive and well-read film critic and analyst the country had produced till date. What people do not know is that he had a polyphasic personality. He directed *Bilet Pherat* and *Alhadini*, two full-length feature films - without giving up writing books or critiquing films. *Alhadini* also won a couple of National Awards. He presented in-depth papers on cinema at national and international seminars, chairing quite a few of them, moderating others. He wrote the musical score for his own films and for *Sati* (1989), directed by his daughter, Aparna Sen. He also directed a documentary on Mrinal Sen on grounds that Mrinal Sen’s contribution to Indian cinema has neither been duly recognized nor properly honoured. “Praises, awards, international acclaim showered on Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak have effectively marginalized

Mrinal’s contribution. I consider this unfair and wish this film will shed light on his rich and unforgettable contribution to cinema per se.”

International film festivals he had not been to, as invited delegate or jury member, could perhaps be ticked off the fingers of one hand. He wrote and edited some of the best books on Indian cinema. His books, *Talking About Films* (1981), *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray* (1980) and *The Painted Face – Studies in India’s Popular Cinema* (1991) have run into several editions. He won the Best Film Critic Award at the National Awards once. He also received a fellowship to make a documentary on Prince Dwarakanath Tagore, grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore.

Born in Shillong in 1921, Chidu-da had staunchly Brahmo parents who were dead against cinema of any kind. Ironically, their son evolved into one of the few cinema scholars and critics – if not the only one – to have placed Indian cinema on the international map – in terms of research, analysis, interpretation and criticism. While in college,

Dasgupta was externed from Patna for his involvement in the 1942 movement. He came to Kolkata to do his post-graduation. An early marriage in 1944 his parents were opposed to (though Supriya his wife, was also from a Brahmo family), forced him to take a lecturer's job at St. Columba's College in Hazaribagh at a salary of Rs.100. At the time, it was not really a modest sum.

Surprisingly, Chidu-da hardly saw films till he was 21. His interest, till then, was focussed on literature, not in cinema. "Manik (Satyajit Ray) egged me on to see good films and would sometimes take me to see a film for the second time. I was personal assistant to Prasanta Mahalanobis, the economics scholar, at the Indian Statistical Institute and taught English literature in the evenings at City College. The turning point came in 1946 when I attacked an essay penned by noted author Buddhadev Bose in Parichay. The impressed editors, Hiren Mukherjee and Niren Roy, asked me to write for them.

In 1947, Satyajit Ray, Harisadhan Dasgupta, fresh from the UCLA, and I, founded the Calcutta Film Society. A comment from Cyril Connelly, editor of Horizon, "Calcutta is a city which has no film society" got us going. Bombay had already laid the foundation for two film societies, one in 1937 and another in 1942 none of which evolved into a movement. Nor did they bring about changes in Indian cinema. We decided to change all this. With 50 members at a membership fee of Rs. 5 per month and Prasanta Mahalanobis as our first President, the membership looked like a veritable Who's Who of the Calcutta intelligentsia," he reminisced.

He suggested the forming of a Federation and along-with six others, met Krishna Kripalani in 1959 and in 1960, the Federation began to function. Chidu-da's long span with ITC – beginning in 1955 - as their Public Relations Chief did not interfere with his objectivity as a critic who wrote with equal fluidity in Bengali and in English.

Modern film critics lack a consistent ideological positioning, according to Chidu-da. "Some of them lack aesthetic sensibility. Some

mistake aesthetics for sensibility," he writes in one among a hundred other papers, titled Black Hole of Indian Film Criticism. A few years before his demise, Chidu-da was persuaded to speak at a panel discussion at a book release function at the British Council, Calcutta. The book was Shyam Benegal by Sangeeta Dutta. He fascinated the select audience with his amazing command over the socio-political-backdrop against which Shyam Benegal made the transition from the synthetic and technically sophisticated world of ad films to feature films with Ankur, tracing Benegal's evolution over time till his last-released film *Zubeida*. Then 83, Chidu-da did not keep too well and often had to lean on a walking stick. But that did not take away from him his soft-spoken, completely casual way of putting erudite things across for the understanding of the common man. He enlarged the canvas of cinema to include the world and in so doing, he raised cinema to a level that blends cerebral experience with aesthetic enjoyment defining ideal entertainment.

His hair in the end was like cotton candy – flossy and white. So was his lately cultivated goatee. His smile was sweet and his voice, soft. It could be deceptive for some because he was an acutely sharp-witted man who defied age with intellect. Till almost the end, one could catch him between his trips across the globe to adjudicate at international film festivals. His painfully arthritic limbs would fail to keep his spirits down, and he would pack up for yet another trip to Uncle Sam country, where his eldest son-in-law Kalyan, taught literature at the Morris College. But then, the mind would always focus back home in the relative peace and quiet of the Dasguptas' Alipur Park Road apartment in Calcutta. The Dasguptas shifted base from their lovely Santiniketan bungalow to the city to stay closer to Aparna Sen for whom, looking after her parents, like films, is one more passion she holds close to her heart.

(PC: Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Trust)

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