

Best Award in 4th Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition for Film Criticism 2023

Sragdharamalini Das

PROBING *JHILLI*, RETRIEVING SUBALTERN LIFEWORLDS



Title: *Jhilli*

Year: 2021

Language: Bengali

Direction, Story, Cinematography, Editing: Ishaan Ghose

Production: Goutam Ghose Associates, Ishaan Ghose

Sound design and mixing: Aneesh Basu

Cast: Aranya Gupta, Bitan Biswas, Sourav Nayak, Shambhunath De, Sayandeep Guha

When a scrawny, young boy named Bokul takes a long last pull on his *bidi* before tossing it aside, his eyes become enthralled by the high-rise buildings that line the Biswa Bangla Sarani of Kolkata. While Bokul ambles between the dashing automobiles on one side and the still waters of the Topsia Lake on the other, the Dhapa landfills are completely

expunged from the visual horizon. Even if it were not, we would surely have looked the other way for could anyone tolerate its terrible stench? In the ninety-three minutes of his debut film *Jhilli* (2021) (meaning discards), director Ishaan Ghose offers a wry nod of affirmation to such a question by recording the many lives that subsist in the dump yards

of Dhapa “whose voices remain unheard,” yet as Ghose reminds us in the film’s epilogue, who “do exist”.

Adjudged as the Best Film in the 2022 Kolkata International Film Festival, *Jhilli* was shot in around thirty days between 2017 and 2019 with a small crew, new actors, and a heavily improvised screenplay. The provisional nature of its filming echoes the tentative lived experience of the inhabitants of Dhapa, a landfill site that was set up in the eastern fringes of Kolkata during colonial times that continues to be the favoured disposal ground of the city well into the twenty-first century. Bokul (Aranya Gupta) is one of the many people who toil in a nearby factory that pulverizes the bones of the city’s animal carcasses that are regularly disposed of at Dhapa. Sprawling across 24.71 hectares, Dhapa endures the repercussions of the city’s rapid urbanization and industrialization which generates an average of 4,000 metric tons of waste every day. Given that the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) expends less than five percent of its budget on disposal arrangements and segregation, it is hardly surprising that the unhygienic mode of waste disposal at Dhapa increases the area’s body burden, jeopardizing the health of its residents. Yet, such risks have been eclipsed by the lucrative prospects offered by the high levels of organic nutrients found in these landfills, making them suitable for harvesting fish and crops. Thus, even as Dhapa garnered recognition as an exemplar of garbage farming by the United Nations Environmental Programme, hitherto its inhabitants remained invisibilized, making *Jhilli* an ethical act of redemption.

The film explores the relationship between the peripheral Dhapa and the mainland of Kolkata by relating the lives of diverse characters who navigate these divided spaces. If Shombhu (Shambhunath De) represents an earlier generation, born and bred in Dhapa’s wasteland, who now finds himself dubbed as useless, then Bokul and his childhood friends Champa (Sourav Nayak) and Ganesh (Bitan Biswas) portray the younger generation which is forced to cope with the neoliberal forces that penetrate and transform their familiar lifeworld. While *Jhilli* focuses on the distress unfurled anew in Dhapa’s community, it is not just another scopophilic aestheticization of subaltern suffering. Rather, *Jhilli* invents a fresh cinematic language that eschews the distant ethnographic gaze of the outsider, binding the viewers in an affective intimacy as this article explicates.

Experiencing the World from the Margins

Within the first ten minutes of *Jhilli*, a conversation between Ganesh and Shombhu intimates the viewers about the impending governmental project that aims to renovate a substantial portion of Dhapa into a recreational park, thereby imperiling the landfill’s existing prospects of habitation and employment. Thus, even as the film begins, Ganesh sighs “golpo shes” (the story is finished). While Bokul continues to eke out an existence amidst Dhapa’s dumps, with only brief forays into the urban space, the more enterprising Ganesh starts a business in the city, albeit of discarded second-hand clothes. Each time Ganesh returns to Dhapa, the landfills alter their shape a bit more —

now flattened by yellow bulldozers in the background, then covered up with black sheets — until it is transformed beyond recognition into vast verdant stretches of land, paved with the iconic blue-and-white blocks of Trinamool Congress (TMC), the ruling party of West Bengal, that can now be integrated into the otherwise beautified city. The Dhapa renovation, which commenced in 2016, was one amongst the many *paribartans* (transformations) — like the erection of trident lampposts and of a Big Ben-replica — brought in by TMC with the supposed intention of “turning Kolkata into London”. While Dhapa’s transformation dissimulates its motive of attracting tourists by using environmental claims, as Jenia Mukherjee argues, even in paying attention to the ecology *in* the city, the state fails to attend to the ecology *of* the city, which must invariably comprise the wellbeing of the existing Dhapa inhabitants. The deleterious effect of this beautification on the likes of Bokul is poignantly depicted in a scene where covered in his own bloody vomit, an emaciated Bokul screams into the void, “khide peyechhe ma” (I’m hungry, mom) as the camera continuously circles around him, somewhat reminiscent of Nita’s imploration for survival in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960). Calcutta, of course, bears testimony to the historical marginalization of subalterns, through what Ananya Roy terms as *vigilante urbanism*, beginning from the nineteenth century itself, be it through the creation of the colonial White-Black Towns or later post-independence projects that tried closing down the footpath markets in Gariahat and the roadside book-shacks in College Street, all perpetuated through the discourse of filth,

waste, and disease projected onto the bodies of the “contaminant” subalterns, inevitably drawing from existing caste strictures of purity-pollution.

Using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house, *Jhilli* strategically claims the discourse of filth and discards to offer a different view of Kolkata from its margins. Towards its end, a protracted twenty-second-long shot centering on the distant city lights and skyscrapers and framed by the dump mounds of Dhapa enacts how it is only by pushing its refuse to its seams that Kolkata can emerge as the “city of joy”. Thus, the only lights that the Dhapa residents know are either such illuminations of the city beyond their reach or that of the kiln fire that makes them toil through the night and later find respite in intoxication. Thereafter ensues an aesthetics of subversion that haunts the film from its very first scene when a beam of light emanates from the still-lit *bidi* that Bokul, standing amidst Dhapa’s debris, flicks away moments after pointing his fingers towards the distant city and saying “dhishkaon”, emulating the sound of a gunshot. The creativity of the sound designer Aneesh Basu (who recently won the Best Audiography Award for *Jhilli* at the 69th National Film Awards) shines through when the *bidi* light beam resembling a gunfire is not sonically accompanied by a real gunshot but by a disruptive static noise, indulging Bokul’s rebellious attitude towards the city, albeit suffusing it with surrealism. A world apart from Kolkata, the trucks in Dhapa move through paths with only heaps of rubble on either side for view, accompanied not by the honking noise of Kolkata’s busy streets but the screech of crows who hover over the

landfill. Later, when these subalterns move through Kolkata's iconic spaces, each of them gets distorted. For instance, the Howrah Bridge features in *Jhilli* not in its majestically curvaceous expanse but as just another urban structure that Ganesh finds himself standing beneath and under which he subsequently rests. Similarly, the Grand Hotel is reduced from its glorious presence to being yet another gate before which Ganesh along with his partner Guddu (Sayandeep Guha) tries to sell his wares. The oppositional subaltern gaze is foregrounded once more when during the city's celebration of Independence Day, Shombhu finds himself not as drawn to the commemorative posters as to pamphlets of shady massage services stuck onto the city's pillars. Again, the subaltern presence in the posh area of Park Street melts the apathy customarily associated with the area into communitarian care when, despite his own penurious state, Ganesh offers financial assistance to the old Shambhu on Guru Nanak Sarani.

However, the resultant defamiliarising aesthetics of *Jhilli* isn't restricted to a subversive revision of Kolkata alone but comprises a reframing of Dhapa that is advanced not just as a space of suffering but one of comforting familiarity to its inhabitants. The opening jarring sounds of *Jhilli* that prime the viewers for something shocking is thus at variance with Bokul's relaxed movement through a space to which, unlike the audience, he is accustomed. Again, the rhythmic beats that accompany the activity of Dhapa's ragpickers whose rush towards the KMC truck unloading waste indicate that what might seem like an exploitative job from the outside is

something that has been integrated into an easy everyday routine for them. Later, when Ganesh points at Dhapa's dirty canals exclaiming that this is where they have grown up, the camera pans the mucky waters at length not only to evoke disgust in the viewers but also to resonate the long years the inhabitants have spent by it. Finally, in an unforgettable scene, a calm-faced Bokul is shown resting atop a heap of worm-infested factory discards against the sound of inhalation-exhalation, suggesting that the dump heap is as natural to him as his breath.

Kolkata, which otherwise rejects its waste, is shown appropriating the same for the aesthetics of a Durga Puja pandal that Bokul finds decorated with discarded fans. It is such appropriations that *Jhilli* resists through its formal structure. Instead of ending the film with the lamentation of Dhapa's renovation, it thus cuts back to Bokul's deranged figure passing through an unknown space of wilderness, resounding with subversive laughter before blacking out as though refusing to end on the note of some patronizing sympathy.

Between Dreams and Despair

Jhilli uses the visual motif of aeroplanes, indifferently flying high over Dhapa, to institute social progress as a conflicted concept that not all the subalterns have access to. Thus, someone like Shombhu can only achieve his dreams of getting a job through momentary lies, while the extremely ambitious Guddu actually proceeds to secure one. Guddu's journey to success is cinematographically mirrored by focusing the camera towards the ground during his

initial days of struggle when Guddu trudges through the mobs of New Market with a heavy bag while later his confident movements are captured in continuous shots following him gliding past the crowds in Park Street on a skateboard, suggesting he has learnt to maneuver the worldly ways.

But such progress doesn't come so easily to Bokul, who is shown moving into the urban space with the hopes of better employment prospects only to repeatedly return to Dhapa. The city, Bokul observes, too stays awake like Dhapa before scorching furnaces — if not to process bones, then to concoct tar. But unlike Dhapa, Kolkata's beautified spaces expel Bokul when he tries to rest there. The unrelenting harshness of Kolkata's urban space is revealed in an intertextual scene where Bokul is shown walking past a moving train with a stick in his hand much like Apu, the protagonist of *Pather Panchali* (1955). *Jhilli* indicates that while Apu can still harbour hopes for the train to transport him to the city away from his oppressive village, for Bokul the urban

space is as suffocating — if not more — than Dhapa's reeking landfills where he finally returns. Echoing Bokul's spatial vacillation, the pace of *Jhilli* dithers between moments of determined activity and reflective lulls to symbolize the stilted nature of subaltern progress which, sooner or later, is surely disrupted.

Coda: Reframing the Subject of Cinema

Like the skeletal residues that are sieved out at Dhapa's bone factory, the landfill along with its inhabitants are the eponymous *jhilli* — social discards — that Ghose's film reclaims. This act of retrieval is captured in a metafilmic shot that centrally frames Bokul while he scans through a film strip that he finds amidst the dump. The shot suggests that subalterns like Bokul need not only be passive consumers of cinema; rather, they too can be its legitimate subjects. *Jhilli* forwards Dhapa as one amongst many spaces that await redemption — through cinematic portrayal, through socio-political actions.

Ms. Sragdharamalini Das is based in Kolkata.