Article

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‘Life, Death, and Everything in Between...’ Understanding the Cinema of Rajen Tarafdar

It's early morning, a river that stretches far and wide; the fishermen have just started their day, setting out on their boats. As they row slowly, moving deep into the river, one of them starts singing, *“Amay Dubaili Re, Amay Bhasaili Re”,* which translates to *“You Drown Me at One Time, and Keep Me Afloat at Another”.* And that sums up their relationship with the river, on which they depend for survival yet can never truly control. The river is both a giver and a taker - while it provides livelihood, it also swallows lives into its depths. Duality. But you see, that’s just how life is. Sometimes, you move up, and at other times, you may also slide down. Like the river, life flows - and you must keep going. You must accept your fate and move on, whether a gain or a loss. As Rabindranath Tagore put it, *“Monere Aaj Koho Je, Bhalo Mondo Jahai Asuk, Sotyore Loho Sohoje” - Tell Your Mind Today, Whether Good or Bad Comes Your Way, Accept the Truth Calmly.*

The scene of the fishermen and the river is from Rajen Tarafdar’s 1960 Bengali film *‘Ganga’,* a gripping drama set in the fishermen community of the Sundarbans. But as far as the idea of duality is concerned - it’s a recurring theme in almost all his films. Sometimes, it’s the conflict between life and

death, joy and sorrow, ambition and fear, and sometimes the individual and the society. Every time, this is captured through a play of light and shadow (chiaroscuro) on the character, reflecting their internal struggle of feeling trapped between two choices. Tarafdar's films have a simple, straightforward message: in the end, the shadow disappears, and only the light remains. His motto is to follow your heart when torn between your brain and heart. Also, love is the answer to almost every problem; it's the one thing that can stand against all odds of the world, and no matter how challenging the battle is, it will eventually win!

To understand Tarafdar's cinema, we first need to understand the era in which he made his films. India had just gained its independence from British rule, and Bengal, in particular, was still dealing with the trauma of the Partition. Society was rapidly changing, leaving people struggling to keep up with the shift. A massive financial crisis, growing unemployment and economic disparities pushed the government to rebuild its economic model. And amidst all that, communist forces were gaining prominence in Bengal, providing the working class a stronger voice.

This was when the Golden Age of Bengali Cinema, as we know it today, began. Nemai Ghosh's *'Chinnamul'*, released in 1950, earned widespread acclaim for its powerful and innovative storytelling. In 1955, Satyajit Ray's *'Pather Panchali'* made waves, establishing him as a force to be reckoned with. Alongside him, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, and Tapan Sinha reigned supreme, each becoming a voice for the voiceless. Meanwhile, mainstream Bengali cinema was also at its peak, with filmmakers like Tarun Majumdar, Ajay Kar, and Arabinda Mukhopadhyay delivering one hit after another.

Rajen Tarafdar and Dhritiman Chatterjee in Mrinal Sen's 'Akaler Sandhane'

Rajen Tarafdar was another stalwart of that era who - quite unfortunately - never gained his contemporaries' critical or commercial success, yet his work reached great heights. Leaving behind his career as a graphic designer at an advertising agency (similar to Ray), he stepped into filmmaking and debuted in 1957 with *'Antariksha'*. He made six more films in his three-decade-long career: *'Ganga', 'Agnisikha', 'Jiban Kahini', 'Akash Chhnoa', 'Palanka',* and *'Nagpash'.* As was common then in Bengali cinema, he made all his films based on Bengali literature. He was also a remarkable actor in movies like *'Akaler Shandhaney', 'Arohan',* and *'Khandhar'*. However, as a filmmaker, he had a unique voice and captured the turbulences of his time on screen.

Every Tarafdar film has a deeply personal story rich with the little nuances of human life. But as the story unfolds, it grows bigger and bigger, eventually reflecting the world around it. Take *'Antariksha',* his debut film, for instance. The film tells a beautiful

love story between its two lead characters, Jayanta and Bani. However, through their story, Tarafdar brings forth what an ideal relationship should be - companionship, understanding, and always having each other's back. When Jayanta asks Bani what he should get from the market for her, she jokingly says, *"An elephant".* And he does bring one - but a toy because that's all he can afford. Well, this is what truly matters in a relationship. It's not about getting the moon and stars for your love; it's about remembering the little things and making an effort. Even if you can't bring a real elephant, your love is just as real because you remembered, cared, and did your best to make her happy.

The love stories in Tarafdar's films are set against the rigidity of society. Society often sees marriage as either a man taking responsibility for a woman or a woman magically fixing a man's life. In *'Antariksha',* during Jayanta and Bani's wedding, Bani is reminded (subtly, of course) that it's now her job to clean up the mess in Jayanta's life. There's a similar thing in 'Ganga' as well. But Tarafdar challenges this notion - he states that love isn't about fixing someone or bearing forced responsibilities. It's just about companionship. That's why we see Jayanta and Bani eating together; when someone knocks at the door, Jayanta leaves his food and gets up to answer (against the norm).

And what if that "someone" is society itself, coming with its rules, ready to put your love on trial? Jayanta finds himself in a dilemma as he learns that his marriage is invalid in society's eyes for reasons beyond his control. Caught between his love and society's rule, his inner conflict comes alive through a play of light and shadow on his face. However, as mentioned before, the shadow disappears, and only the light remains. Jayanta chooses love over society and fights. And eventually, love wins.

Ruma Guha Thakurta in 'Ganga'

Rajen Tarafdar was influenced by Jean Renoir's 1951 film, *'The River',* as evidenced in his second film, *'Ganga'.* Like *'The River'*, *'Ganga'* explores life along the Ganges but takes a different approach in its storytelling. While the British film unfolds through the eyes of a white and upper-class child, *'Ganga'* incorporates a third-person narrative in capturing the hardships of the fishermen community in the Sundarbans. It flips the perspective and looks at life through the world of the working class. It shows their

struggle, the exploitation they face, and how they are never given their due. However, the core philosophy remains the same. The river is a metaphor for life - it gives and takes but never stops.

Both *'Antariksha'* and *'Ganga'* begin with a montage of the people who make up the world these films are set in. While personal stories are at the core, these films don't belong to individuals but to communities. The protagonists are just a part of a bigger picture, and the world around them shapes their lives.

Niranjan Ray as Bilash in 'Ganga'

Bilash in *'Ganga'*, played by Niranjan Ray, represents ambition, as he wants to go into the sea to catch fish. But his dreams are held back by fear, whether of his uncle Panchu (Gyanesh Mukherjee) or the community, who is haunted by the loss of one of their own to the sea long ago. And once again, light and shadow play on the characters as they gather to decide whether to go into the sea. This conflict defines life: You either continue as you are and struggle every day for the rest of your life or break out of your comfort zone, win your fear, and set out to chase something greater.

Tarafdar shows in his film that the strength to overcome fear comes from another force: love! Bilash falls in love, gets married, and can only set out to the sea. His uncle's idea behind getting him married was to tie him down and erase his thoughts of going to sea. However, the fact is that love isn't about holding someone back. It's about giving them the strength to move forward. You rise above all constraints and utilize your full potential only when loved. You chase your dreams, not to escape but hoping to return. Maybe Bilash could never have set out before because once he had achieved his dream, there was nothing to return to. Love gives him the strength to go after his dream and the reason to find his way back.

And when the fishermen finally set out on their voyage to the sea, the shadow disappears as they have now won the fear. Yes, this journey could cost them their lives, but that's still better than living with conflicts and the weight of "what ifs". After all, what's life without taking risks?

In *'Ganga',* Tarafdar portrays the lives of the fishermen from within their world and not as a distant observer. That's why it remains a sensitive portrayal throughout. However, he also maintains a sense of distance between this world and the audience. Whenever there's some activity among the fishermen - for example, the boat race at the film's beginning - the camera remains static, and never oscillates. He could have easily treated the camera as a character, making us a part of the world. But by placing the camera static, he clarifies that there's a barrier. While watching the film, I felt that a statement from the director: *"Hey, you are just a spectator here, watching from the comfort of your*

home. You can never truly understand these people's struggles, so don't even pretend you do. They don't need your sympathy." The camera work is different at other times, especially in moments of love. Love is something that everyone understands, regardless of socio-economic background. Bilash's feelings for Himi are the same as what you feel for your crush or partner. Panchu's concerns for his nephew are the same as those you feel about your kids. The fear in Himi's eyes when Bilash sets out to the sea is the same as when your loved one leaves to chase their dreams. These are core human emotions which bind us all despite our different worlds.

In *'The River'*, Bogey, one of the children, dies toward the end. In *'Ganga'*, it's Panchu, an old man. Both cases convey that death is inevitable and can come at any time. All you can do is go on. If something pulls you down, you rise and begin again. As *'The River'* puts it: *"The river runs, the round world spins. Dawn and lamplight. Sun follows day—night, stars, and moon. The day ends. The end begins."*

Tarafdar's third film is *'Agnisikha'* - which translates to "Flame of Fire". Like fire is destructive and constructive (again, a duality), the film exposes the two opposing forces within a system. However, this isn't about taking sides or pointing fingers; the film shows that opposing forces can sometimes be two reflections of the same truth. At the heart of *'Agnisikha'* is Sujata, the eldest daughter of a struggling Bengali family, who is forced to take up a job after her father is killed in a car accident caused by an industrialist's son. Ashim, the accused, is a villain in her eyes, as he uses his power to free himself from the case. However, the film takes a third-person narrative, where Ashim is seen not as a culprit but as a victim of circumstances - caught in something he never chose. He struggles with guilt and takes up a job despite his privilege to keep himself busy. For Sujata, this is a necessity; for him, it's just a way to distraction - two lives, two different realities, but tied together by fate. That's just how the society is built. And it's beyond control. You accept reality and find a way to cope.

As destiny would have it, Sujata lands a job under Ashim, unaware that it's the same man who killed her father. Ashim, too, remains oblivious that she is the daughter of the man he ran over. And well, the two fall in love, only to later learn their tragic connection. The conflict soon consumes them both. Sujata is trapped between love and hate, torn between her feelings for Ashim and the painful truth of what he has done to her. Ashim, too, is confused as he struggles with the question: How to be with a woman whose father died because of you? It's a constant tug-of-war between the brain and the heart, logic and emotion, guilt and love, forgiveness and pride. Again, Tarafdar contrasts light and shadow on the characters' faces, reflecting their inner conflicts. But as always, the shadow disappears eventually, leaving the room entirely for the light. Love wins. Hence, when Sujata finally steps down and runs toward Ashim, it's as if she is leaving all her pride and ego behind. It's not a defeat; it's simply surrendering to a greater power because nothing else matters.

It's pretty interesting that after the accident, Ashim tried to make things right in the only way he knew - by offering money to the family. Maybe he thought that would

bring peace to the family and ease his guilt. But let's face the truth - peace is not something you buy. In the film, it comes only when he and Sujata come together. Well, it's love, not money, that has the power to heal what's broken.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter to us whether Ashim was guilty or not. The film never attempts to go into that argument. The tragedy was meant to happen because the universe had already decided it. As Murphy's Law states, *"Anything that can go wrong will go wrong."* But that doesn't mean the past should define what's coming next. The future is still in your hands. It's up to you to hold on to the pain or rise above and move forward. In *'The River'*, Harriet asks, *"What will I do then?"* John replies, *"You will begin again. You know what I think? I think with everything that happens to you, with every person you meet who is important to you, You either die a little bit or are born again."*

'Jiban Kahini', Tarafdar's fourth film as a director, explores a powerful clash between life and death. The film follows an old, struggling insurance agent who is often seen running - sometimes from a furious dog, sometimes from an angry shopkeeper, and sometimes from his lenders. But when we try to understand the man, we realize that he is running away from death. He wants to survive at any cost, and for that, he sells the very fear that he is running from - death. There's a conversation between him and one of his clients at the beginning of the film:

- What is Life?

- Well, life is a journey toward death. The only truth is death. It will come sooner or later. That's why I say life is temporary. You think you're alive today, but can you swear you'll still be here tomorrow?

The man is named Naba Jiban - a literal translation would be "New Life". And he lives up to his name. He believes life is about pushing death back every day and starting anew. However, there comes a moment when he realizes that his everyday struggle is no different from death. Here, too, light and shadow play across his face as he begins to question his existence. Should he keep living, struggling, and dying a little every day? Or should he die and end it all at once? As William Shakespeare would ask here, *"To Be or Not To Be?"*.

Quite interestingly, Tarafdar had already answered in his previous film, *'Ganga'*. The fishermen, despite their hardships, refuse to give up on life. Yes, they struggle, have doubts, and remain torn between fear and ambition for a long time. But in the end, they choose ambition and fight - not just to survive, but to set things right. If

the road ahead shows nothing but suffering, you find the strength to change your path and begin again. Giving up is not even an option.

Naba Jiban decides to end his life. But just when he is about to jump off a bridge, he crosses paths with a young man, Amar (ironically, meaning "immortal"), who is there for the same reason. And that's when an idea strikes him - why not turn Amar's death into something useful, something he can profit from? What follows is a brilliant black comedy built on a simple philosophy - when life makes you suffer, you don't escape it. You fight. And you live.

The struggle in *'Jiban Kahini'* doesn't end in a day; instead, it worsens with time. But now there's a hope for a better tomorrow that keeps them going. Hope is all you need. It pushes you forward when everything else fails. As long as there's hope, the fight isn't over. As *'The Shawshank Redemption'* put it, *"... hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies."* Also, the film reminds me of the iconic monologue of Apu from Satyajit Ray's *'Apur Sansar'*: *"... Perhaps he has greatness in him, the ability to create, but he does nothing great. He remains poor. But he never turns away from life. He doesn't run away. He wants to live. He says living itself brings fulfilment and joy!"*

There's a subplot of a love story in the film between Amar and Shyamali (daughter of Naba Jiban, played by Sandhya Roy). And again, it's the power of love that Tarafdar brings into focus, showing how it gives strength even in the darkest times. Amar, who was ready to die, now finds a reason to live, while Shyamali, once trapped in darkness, finally begins to see the light. She wears a new saree, sings, laughs, and whatnot, and just like that, life starts feeling worth living.

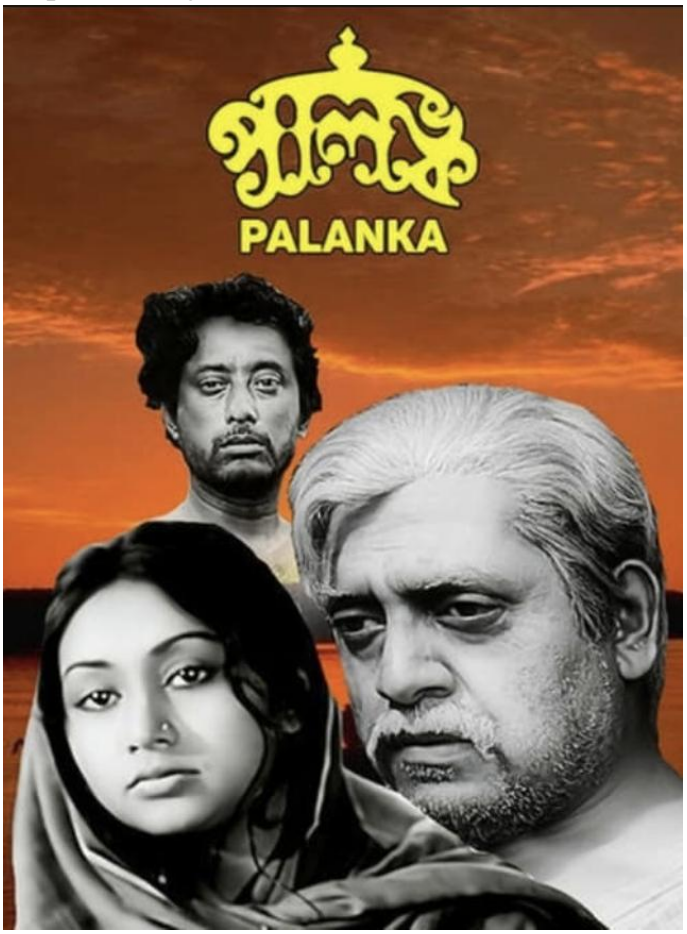
Tarafdar's films are deeply personal and, eventually, become highly political. Or, as filmmaker Anurag Kashyap puts it, *"Personal is political."* However, unlike Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen's films, where politics is upfront, politics is usually shown subtly through metaphors and underlying themes. The backdrop in *'Antariksha'* is the feudal system of Bengal, featuring a hierarchical social structure. While the Zamindar, played by Chhabi Biswas, isn't shown in a traditionally negative light, the film cleverly critiques the power dynamics. The protagonist, who lives under the Zamindar's shelter, often has his life dictated by him. In fact, in the end, the Zamindar decides his fate. That's how the system works, with the capitalists pulling the strings of everyday lives. Because the 'golden rule' of the game is, as the saying goes, *"Whoever has the gold makes the rules." 'Ganga',* as mentioned before, views the system through the working class, the fishermen. They work hard to catch fish - a staple of Bengali cuisine - but ironically, they can rarely afford to enjoy it themselves. Despite their hard work, the real profits in the business don't go to them but to those sitting at the top. The upper class reap the rewards of the working class's efforts, while the workers are always deprived. The filmmaker advocates the ideals of socialism in each of his films, highlighting the struggles of the working class and questioning the unequal distribution of wealth and power. *'Agnisikha'* revolves around an industrialist's son running over an ordinary, middle-class man. It feels like a metaphor for how the capitalists crush the working class

and then move on while leaving the poor behind. But Tarafdar states that this relentless oppression doesn't come without consequences. There's a dialogue by Rakhal Da (played by Anup Kumar) in the film, *"... Beneath a fragile structure, bricks are slipping away one by one."* It's as if the societal system is a structure that appears strong on the outside but is weak from within. The system stands on the backs of the working class, yet those people are never given their due. After being oppressed for too long, they step away one by one - and when they are gone forever, the structure collapses. Today, as we witness buildings and bridges collapsing in several Indian cities, Tarafdar's films feel more relevant than ever - now it's a truth we can no longer ignore. However, it's also important to note that his movies don't point fingers at any particular group - they question the system. *'Agnisikha'*, for instance, makes it clear that even in a capitalist world, there are both good and bad people. You cannot put it into a box. The system itself is the trap, where even the good are stuck. As a result, even though some may genuinely care for the working class, it often ends up being sympathy - as if looking at a slum from the 27th floor of a high-rise. He shows that the journey from sympathy to empathy happens only through love, not money. Love is the only way to break the class divide; only then can everyone be seen simply as a human being.

One of the standout features of Tarafdar's films is how effectively they capture the time that they are set in. *'Jiban Kahini'* takes us back to the 50s, when India had just gained independence. Through the struggles of its characters, the film holds up a mirror and asks, *"Is this what independence looks like?"* The administrative power may have passed from the British to the Indians, but the struggle remains the same for the people who build the nation. And that's why when Naba Jiban tries to jump off the building, an extreme wide shot shows how small and insignificant he is in front of the system. At one point, as he walks the street, exhausted and feeling completely lost, he looks up and sees the flag of independent India atop a building. Independent India. And that's a low-angle shot that implies his helplessness even when the nation - at least on a surface level - has touched the sky. The man's face fills with pain and frustration; in that moment, we see our reflections in him. But he must keep walking alone because the nation is too busy to notice the struggles on the ground. So, he walks and keeps walking. Well, just a couple of years before the film was released, an American singer named Bob Dylan had sung a few lines: *"How many roads must a man walk down/Before you call him a man? How many seas must a white dove sail/Before she sleeps in the sand?... And how many years can some people exist/Before they're allowed to be free?"*

Tarafdar's films often flip the traditional gender roles, showing they cannot be confined to fixed norms. In films like *'Ganga'* and *'Jiban Kahini'*, the women fearlessly express their feelings to the men, breaking away from society's set rules. In *'Ganga'*, there's a scene where the husband serves his wife a meal while she sleeps. When she wakes up throwing tantrums, he gently coaxes her to eat. Again, it's the filmmaker's idea of an ideal relationship - shaped by love and care, not gender roles.

On the other hand, there's a critique of patriarchy and male ego in several ways as well. Sujata in *'Agnisikha'* reminds me of Arati from Ray's *'Mahanagar'* and Nita from Ghatak's *'Meghe Dhaka Tara'*. When she starts working, the world around her treats her differently. At the office, surrounded by men, she feels out of place. Rakhal Da's male ego is hurt as he struggles to accept that she earns more than him. But what matters here is Sujata provides for her family just like - no, not "a man would," because that's our preconceived idea of a man's role - but like the eldest of a family, simply taking on the responsibility.



'Palanka', released in 1975, differs slightly from Tarafdar's other films in style and making. Perhaps because it was made in the later phase of his career (after a long hiatus, he returned to the director's chair) when he was even more mature - both as a person and as a filmmaker; also, it's far more political than his previous films. The film begins in Bangladesh, right after the Bangladesh Liberation War (Muktijuddho), and then takes a flashback -where the main story unfolds - to 1951, in East Pakistan, a period immediately after the Partition of India. Through the world of Rajmohan, aka Dhola Korta, a Hindu aristocrat, and Maqbool, a poor Muslim, and a Palanka (master bed) that remains between them, the film explores themes like Hindu-Muslim relations, displacement and the dilemma of belonging, relativism of power dynamics, commodity fetishism, and material consciousness among others.

The film is set in a time when both India and Pakistan are struggling with the trauma of Partition. East Pakistan is still under West Pakistan's rule, and Hindus are migrating to India - many have already left, while others are leaving one by one. But no matter where they are, the dilemma of belonging remains the same. If they stay in East Pakistan, they must live as a minority, feeling out of place in their land. And if they leave everything behind and go to India, they must live in an unknown land for the rest of their lives, with a completely different culture and way of life. Where do they truly belong? It's a struggle for identity, belonging, and choosing between home and survival.

Rajmohan, played by Utpal Dutt, decides to stay in East Pakistan rather than migrate to India with his family. His companion here is Maqbool (Anwar Hossain), whose family has served in his house for generations. The conflict arises when Rajmohan sells his master bed to Maqbool, who makes space for it in his

crumbling hut. The bed becomes a symbol of class. For Maqbool, who is trapped in poverty with no way to rise above his low socio-economic status, owning the bed feels like moving up in the social hierarchy. And when Rajmohan gives it away, it's as if his status is slipping away from his hands. This sparks an uproar among the upper-class Muslims in the village, who accuse Maqbool of trying to cross the boundaries of his class. Those at the top of the power dynamics would never want the lower class to rise, as it would disrupt the system they have created to keep control.

In *'Palanka',* Tarafdar incorporates Karl Marx's ideas to critique the capitalist system. The bed is highly regarded because of the class it represents, not the labour that crafted it. Toward the film's end, someone tells Rajmohan, *"You both have gone mad - you after losing the bed, and Maqbool after getting it."* This obsession with the bed sums up an integral aspect of capitalism, where a commodity dictates people's behaviours and divides them into two: those who own it and those who desire to own it. It's already a dystopian world where human relationships are defined only by material possessions. But Tarafdar argues that they should be built on emotions. That's why, in the end, the conflict is resolved when Rajmohan visits Maqbool's hut and sees the latter's children sleeping peacefully on the bed. Only then does he realize that materials are meant to serve a purpose, not just be symbols of wealth and power. The bed belongs to Maqbool, who truly needs it, not Rajmohan, for whom it holds no real value. With this, the filmmaker brings forth an ideal world where possessions don't define people but the other way around.

The film touches upon various other issues as well. It takes us back to the calamitous days of mass displacement thanks to the Partition of India, showcasing how one decision by a powerful few led to the enormous suffering of ordinary people. Using actual footage - similar to Mrinal Sen and several other Marxist filmmakers -, Tarafdar portrays the claustrophobic world the refugees were put into. It also explores ethnonationalism, as people in East Pakistan fight over whether the land belongs to Hindus or Muslims. It's not the first time, though - *'Ganga'* also features a scene where fishermen fight over which parts of the river belong to which groups. But *'Palanka'* answers: it belongs to everyone, regardless of ethnicity. The film begins with a Muslim boatman ferrying Hindus across a river and ends with Maqbool, a Muslim, helping Rajmohan, a Hindu, cross a narrow bridge - both in a Muslim-majority country. In any place, at any given time, the majority is supposed to help the minority, not push them aside. Watching the film today might feel overly optimistic, given the rising geopolitical tensions and religious divides worldwide. But in the end, hope is all we have, believing that love will win over hate sooner or later! Because, as The Beatles said, *"All you need is love. All you need is love. All you need is love, love. Love is all you need."*

Several Western filmmakers influenced Rajen Tarafdar. Besides Jean Renoir, the list includes François Reichenbach, Chris Marker, and Ingmar Bergman, among others. However, the one whose impact is most evident in his work is probably Bergman - technically and philosophically. The light and shadow thing is

also a prominent element in Bergman's films. Both were actively involved in theatre, which is often reflected in their films' theatrical style of the mise-en-scène. While Bergman's films have been described as "profoundly personal meditations into the myriad struggles facing the psyche and the soul", Tarafdar's films also explore the complexities of human existence in similar ways. Whether it's the use of long takes, close-ups, diffused lighting, silence, or symbolic visuals - their films, at times, share a similar technical approach to storytelling. *'Ganga'*, in particular, carries a harsh tone in depicting rural struggle and human suffering - something often seen in Bergman's films as well.

The way death comes repeatedly - and in various ways - in Tarafdar's cinema reminds me of Bergman's film, *'The Seventh Seal'*. Panchu's death in *'Ganga'* or the father's in *'Agnisikha'* ultimately reinforces what the personification of Death (Bengt Ekerot) says in *'The Seventh Seal'*: *Nothing escapes me. No one escapes me."* Much like the Black Death (bubonic plague) hunts people in Bergman's film, in Tarafdar's world, poverty does the same. And that's why we often see Naba Jiban in 'Jiban Kahini' on the run. However, just as Antonius Block fights before surrendering, Tarafdar's characters must fight before giving in. Thus, both filmmakers are concerned less about death and more about what it means to live before it arrives. In the iconic "Wild Strawberry" scene in *'The Seventh Seal'*, Block enjoys a meal of wild strawberries and milk with the artist's family, talking, laughing and singing, even with death looming behind him. In *'Jiban Kahini'*, Amar, knowing he has only a few days left, enjoys life by fulfilling his dreams - dining at a high-end restaurant and indulging in paan (Betel leaf, which symbolizes simple joy in Bengali culture, just as wild strawberries do in Swedish culture). These small pleasures may not answer the questions about life you have in mind, but they do make the journey a little more meaningful and a little less painful. As Block states, *"... But I will remember this moment. The stillness and the dusk. The bowl of wild strawberries, the bowl of milk. Your faces in the evening light. Mikael is lying asleep. I will try to remember who we spoke of. And I will carry this memory between my hands as carefully as if it were a bowl brimming with freshly milked milk. And this will be a sign for me. And greatly fulfilling."* Knowing we will all die sooner or later, why don't we live life to the fullest and embrace its little joys? Well, only if we do will we be able to answer like Block when death asks, *"Do you regret your journey?"* confidently, *"I do not regret anything...!"*

In *'Palanka'*, how objects serve as symbols of the passage of time and evoke memories of "good old days" for Rajmohan is strikingly similar to that in Bergman's 1957 film, *'Wild Strawberries'*. As Professor Isak in *'Wild Strawberries'* reflects on his journey, things like the walls of the old house, the corridors, the dining table, and the garden, among others, transport him back to a time long past. For Rajmohan, it's the old mansion with all its furniture. And that's why, as he is often seen inside his mansion, it feels like he is imprisoned in his own memories. His loneliness reminds me of that conversation between Isac and the examiner in *'Wild Strawberries'*:

- Gone. All are gone. Removed by an operation. It's a surgical masterpiece. No pain. Nothing that bleeds or trembles.
- How silent it is.
- A perfect achievement in its way, Professor.
- And the punishment?
- The usual, I suppose. Loneliness.
- Loneliness?
- Precisely.
- Is there no mercy?
- Don't ask me. I don't know.

However, both films also highlight that life is about accepting reality and moving on while appreciating what remains. Both Isac and Rajmohan will learn to do that by the end of the films.

What's important here is that despite the influences from Western cinema, Tarafdar's films are entirely his voice - deeply rooted in Bengali culture and capture its traditions, emotions, and everyday life. These films are built on social realism but never detract from incorporating drama/melodrama whenever needed. His characters sing, sometimes dance, and deliver dramatic dialogues, yet at the core, they remain deeply human - people we connect with. A standout feature of his films is the melodies that beautifully complement the emotions and storytelling. And the performances are always spot-on, bringing the characters to life on screen. While his films are not as discussed - forget celebrated - as they should be, they are undoubtedly a golden chapter in the history of Bengali and World cinema.

Tarafdar's films portray the struggles of life but always end on a happy note. Jayanta gets free at the end of *'Antariksha'*. *'Ganga'* doesn't have a typical happy ending but ends with a sense of hope. Ashim and Sujata unite in the climax of *'Agnisikha'*. The conflict in *'Palanka'* will eventually be resolved. At the end of *'Jiban Kahini'*, Naba Jiban screams, *"Dada, Aami Banchte Chai!"* (Brother, I Want to Live!) with the same intensity as Neeta in *'Meghe Dhaka Tara'*. But unlike Ghatak, Tarafdar grants his wish, so life wins this time. Decades after the release of these films, a Bollywood superstar would come on the screen and say, *"... Hamari filmon ki tarah hamari zindagi mein bhi end mein sab theek ho jaata hai. Happy Endings. Aur agar, aur agar theek na ho to woh the end nahin hai dosto, picture abhi baaki hai!" - Just like in our films, everything turns out fine in life too. Happy Endings. And if it isn't fine yet, then it's not the end, my friends - the picture isn't yet over!*

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Sayan Paul writes on cinema.